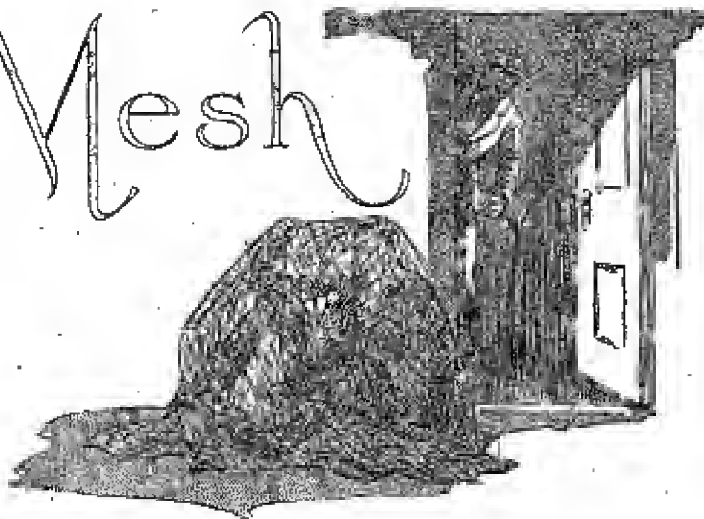


The Mesh

by

George
C. Jenks

Author of "Thews of Battle," etc.



COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE.

CHAPTER I.

SUSPICIONS.

A LIVERIED youth, with a penetrating voice, skimmed over the tessellated lower floor of the Hotel Supremacy, yawping nasally at measured intervals:

"Mr. Oliver, please! Mr. Oliver, please!"

The lobby did not yield Mr. Oliver. So the boy, light-footed and persistent, "paged" him in the luxurious café, which, with its rather overdone decorations, its life-size oil studies in the nude—including a painting of "Aphrodite" was a marvel of voluptuous flesh tints—its freshly barbered, white-clad bartenders, its incessant tinkling of glass, its lazy clouds of blue smoke, and its noisily talking groups of well-dressed men, was redolent of prosperous masculinity.

"Mr. Oliver, please!" sang the page.

"What's that, boy?"

A slim young man in evening clothes, leaning negligently against the end of the mahogany bar, held up a languid finger.

At first glance the young man seemed almost a boy himself. But when he spoke, certain little crooked lines leaped to the corners of his eyes, while others ran from the base of his rather long nose to the drooping ends of his thin lips, and he aged immediately. He was probably about thirty.

"Mr. Oliver?" queried the boy. Then, as there was no immediate reply, he held out a card on a salver. "The gentleman's in the grill."

The lounge seemed barely to glance at the card. But any one familiar with the capacity of such shifty yellow eyes as he possessed would know that he had read the name in that one swift flash.

He waved the salver away.

"I'm not Mr. Oliver. You'll find him in the palm-room."

The slim young man sauntered out of one door as the page slithered through another, bound for the gorgeous *salle à manger* at the other side of the lobby, where several scores of people were dining magnificently under the sheltering palms.

"Mr. Oliver, please!"

A broad-shouldered man, whose good-humored face looked as if it might have been wind-swept and sun-browned for most of his thirty-five years or so, and whose white shirt-front seemed a yard wide, jumped from his chair at a neighboring table and swung the drawling boy around as he might have dealt with a roped steer.

"Hold on, son! What Oliver do you want? What's the gent's first name?"

The boy referred to a scrap of paper and answered: "Mr. Barry Oliver."

"That's me. Who wants—gimme me that card!"

He read the name, and emitted a whoop that startled people around them, although the steady hum of conversation swallowed it up before it could get far.

"Where is he, boy? Where the blazes is he? Bring him here. Say, Lucy—he turned to the pretty girl at the other side of the table—"it's Bob Tower! The durned old fraud! How did he know we were here? Gee! This is the real stuff." He saw the boy still standing near the table. "Get out, young fellow. Didn't I tell you to bring him here? Never mind! I'll get him myself. Take me to him."

But the pretty girl had something to say about this. She was on her feet, her slim fingers holding Mr. Oliver's wrist with a power that did not astonish him, although a stranger might have wondered.

"You stay right here, Barry Oliver!" she ordered, in low, decisive tones. "You're not in Arizona now, to go loping away whenever the notion strikes you. Have some respect for your sister. Besides, you might not be able to find your way back in this big, rambling hotel."

"Huh! I never lost myself on a back trail yet," was the grumbling rejoinder. "And who says I don't respect you? I'd like to see the cuss who'd dare—" He stopped and roared at the boy: "Bring Mr. Tower here, durn you!"

"Here I am, Barry!" broke in a pleasant voice. "I just heard you were in this room."

A stalwart young fellow, in the uniform of a captain of artillery, seized his hand in a grip as wiry as his own, and the two shook with the ardor of men who really like each other.

"Why, you durned old long-legged maverick!" bellowed Barry, bringing a hamlike hand down on Bob Tower's shoulder with a slam that jarted him. "I ain't set eyes on you since you pulled your freight out of Tucson, six years ago. Gee! I'm glad to see—" He caught sight of the boy, who was absently fanning himself with his salver as he stared at the tempestuous meeting. "Get out of this, you wall-eyed coyote! What are you blinking at? Here!"

He dragged out a thick roll of bills, peeled one off, and thrust it at the page,

who saw a "V" on it, and mumbling an incoherent "Thank you, sir!" hurried away in a panic of bewildered delight.

"Oh, by the way, Bob!" went on Barry, in a more moderate tone. "I beg your pardon! You used to know Lucy, my sister. That is, you've seen her, I think. Wasn't she home from school when you were on the ranch? Lucy, you don't remember Mr. Tower?"

"I shouldn't have known him, but I believe I remember his being with you for a while," she said, as she gave Bob Tower her firm little hand.

"Nigh five weeks it was," put in Barry. Lucy laughed, and oh, what a sweet, rippling laugh it was!

"Yes. But I was only thirteen then, and Mrs. Rowton never would let me go riding with the men if she could help it; Mrs. Rowton was our housekeeper," she explained to Mr. Tower.

"And is still," added Barry, as the waiter brought another chair, and the three settled down for dinner. "A good old soul! I couldn't be away now if she weren't on the ranch to look after things. I'm over in New Mexico a great deal. Got hold of a silver mine there, and it's been panning out rather well.

"That's why I'm here. I've come to spend some money. You know, before I went West I was in the importing business with my father here in New York. We handled most everything in the line of art, but our specialty was rare laces. When father died, the business had run down somewhat, and, anyhow, I was always something of a crank on outdoor life—played polo whenever I could spare time. So I sold out and bought the ranch on the Rio Verde where you came—"

Barry Oliver's pause brought Bob Tower to himself. While not altogether unmindful of what Barry had been saying, he had been looking at the girl as she bent over the menu, and found himself solemnly debating as to whether it was the pink flush that set off the dimples, or the dimples that gave such intoxicating charm to the rose-petal glow on her delicately rounded cheeks.

Just then she raised her dark eyes for a

second, and he was struck by lightning. So he gave up his problem about the dimples and the rose-flush, and, deciding that the combination was unspeakably ravishing and enticing, let it go at that.

It was at that particular instant that Barry stopped speaking.

"Yes, I see," stammered Bob. "What are you going to spend money on in New York? Anything particular?"

Barry Oliver made sure that the waiter was out of hearing, and replied, in a confidential tone that only his sister and Bob Tower could hear:

"Yes. It's some old laces—the Trevelyan collection—that are about as precious as anything in these United States. You hear what I'm telling you. I got on to them from an old padre at a 'dobe mission in the Guadalupe hills in New Mexico. He has some documents in French that tell about a bunch of laces the old monks brought from France about the end of the sixteenth century.

"He told me a long story about how the laces were swiped by some Spaniards, sold in France, and at last found their way to England. Well, never mind about details. I've arranged to buy the lot for cash."

"Then they are in New York now?" queried Bob.

"Sure! And the best of it is I have a customer for them in Los Angeles, a banker—a cranky old chap, but good as gold—who used to know my dad in New York, and who has one of the most wonderful art collections west of the Rockies. He's always adding to it, so when the padre told me his yarn, and I found out where they were, I used the cable and found out I could get them.

"Then I hiked over to Los Angeles, made my deal with the banker, and after fixing up my affairs in Arizona and New Mexico so that they'd run along without me for a while, came down here with Lucy, for business and pleasure combined. I expect to clean up ten thousand dollars on the deal."

"They must be valuable when you can make such a profit as that," remarked Bob, with his eyes on Lucy's dimples. "Are there many pieces?"

"Not so very many. A dozen or so. My man won't get them all at that," answered Barry Oliver, with a nod toward Lucy. "I'm holding out one piece. It's a collar, nearly four hundred years old, that was worn by Catherine de Medici—the famous Medici, you know—and the padre says it's a peach. Lucy gets that collar."

"Isn't that fine, Mr. Tower?" cried Lucy, her eyes glistening. "Barry is a pretty good brother—in some ways," she added, with a mischievous little laugh. "He's promised to bring me my collar this evening."

"Yes. The stuff is at the Z and V pier. The ship came in yesterday. I am to be at the gate at half past eight," went on Barry with a grin. "Sounds all very mysterious, doesn't it? But in these times the government is mighty particular, especially about vessels and what they are doing.

"So the man who will bring the laces out to me, in an ordinary hand-bag, will ask and give a pass-word, and a lot of bunk like that. The bag is worth fifty thousand dollars, you see, and I'm to hand over a certified check for that amount when the bag is passed to me. Secrecy's all right for me. If these laces were talked about, and my customer knew it, blooie; the deal would be all off."

The soup arrived then, and Barry Oliver fell upon it with true Western fervor, so that there was little more conversation on any subject, and none at all about the laces until the next course. Then Barry remarked, while the waiter was momentarily absent:

"There have been other people after these laces, and they would have paid as much as I'm giving. But they were too late."

"Who are the people?" asked Bob.

"Don't know. It was Smithson, the lace importer of West Broadway, who told me, and it was an agent he didn't know who came to him about it. There's always so much mystery about big purchases of art objects. Why, I'm not allowed to give the name of the Los Angeles banker I'm dealing with, even to my own family. Lucy doesn't know for sure who he is."

"I suppose I may guess, mayn't I?" she

laughed, her transparently delicate little finger pointing mockingly at her brother as she picked up her fish fork. "There aren't so many bankers in Los Angeles with the largest collection, you know."

Barry ignored this—for the waiter was bobbing about again—and the dinner went on to the end with careless conversation and inerriment, and Bob Tower making no effort to resist the fascination of this demure, self-possessed beauty, who had evolved wonderfully from the leggy little girl he remembered six years before.

"Hello!" exclaimed Barry briskly, looking at his watch. "It's nearly eight o'clock. I'll have to go. By the way, Bob, it's lucky we found each other to-night. Here's my sister, and—"

"Yes, it is very lucky," interrupted Bob with enthusiasm, as he watched a dimple disappear from the middle of her cheek and come up again at the corner of the ripe cherry mouth.

"Yes," continued Barry, pushing back his chair, "I should have had to let her stay up alone in our rooms while I'm away. But, now, if you'll do me a favor, you might hang around with her down here, listening to the music and doing the lah-de-dah in Peacock Alley till I get back. It ought not to take more than an hour. Then I'll show you something in the way of laces that I bet you never saw before."

Do him a favor! Gosh!

What Bob really said was: "If Miss Oliver thinks I sha'n't bore her, I shall be delighted."

She gave him a reassuring smile, when Barry, struck by a sudden misgiving, asked with some anxiety:

"It won't interfere with your military duties, will it, Bob? I'd forgotten for the moment that Uncle Sam has a mortgage on your time."

"Don't worry about that, Barry," replied Bob, as he offered his arm to Lucy. "I have several days' leave. There's some business connected with the estate that requires my presence—signing things, and so forth—and I'm in New York to enjoy myself."

They all walked together to the lobby. Then Barry waved his hand and strode

away for the taxicab he had ordered. They heard him outside the door, roaring at somebody because the cab was not there, when Bob felt the girl's fingers tighten on his arm as she whispered earnestly:

"Look at that man over there—the one with the long nose—the young man in evening dress. See how he's watching Barry!"

He looked down at her, and the fire in her dark eyes made his head spin as he answered: "I see him. Not a very pleasant-looking chap, is he? Why do you suppose he's watching Barry? Jove! He's hurrying out. What do you know about him? Anything?"

"I don't know him," she replied hurriedly, her breath coming in gasps. "But he's been near Barry and me so many times in the two days we've been here that I can hardly believe it's always an accident."

"Of course it isn't," broke in Bob. "This town is full of crooks of all kinds, and many of them wear respectable clothes. If this man has been hanging around your brother, it must have been that he was trying to overhear something Barry was saying."

He stopped and stared frowningly through the glass door.

"Pardon me! Could you go up to your rooms?" he asked, with an agitation that was seven-tenths anger. "I find that I have to go out. It's important. It is dreadful to leave you so abruptly. But—"

He had not finished, but ran to the door to call sharply for a taxi.

"Cab, sir?" chirped the starter. "Yes, sir—here y' are, sir!"

Bob had one foot already in the cab when the vision of the girl with peachlike cheeks, duskily flashing eyes and a mouth wickedly enticing, made him stop and look around irresolutely.

"Lord! I can't leave her like this!" he muttered. "It's outrageous. I'll have to go and tell her. But time is so precious—"

He turned to go into the hotel when his way was blocked by a slight, undulating figure in a long, black cloak, and a white hand lay on his sleeve.

"I beg your—" blurted out Bob. Then, as the red-gold of her hair shone through a black lace shawl, and the light from the

doorway revealed her piquant features, he stammered: "Miss Oliver! I—"

"I'm going with you—if I may!" she interrupted. "Please don't argue."

There was an intoxicating touch of royal authority in her low tones. He took her hand to assist her into the cab, and as they slipped along over the asphalt, Bob thrilled as he felt her soft, warm bosom against his arm. Lucy, perhaps unconsciously, had not removed her ungloved hand from the strong clasp of the handsome young artilleryman. Well, Venus could not resist Mars, and mythological history, like any other kind, repeats itself.

"Don't let that other cab out of sight!" warned Bob through the front window.

"Not on your life!" was the driver's confident reply.

"Isn't this fun!" whispered the girl, though her serious tone belied the light words.

"Fun's no name for it!" replied Bob, as he ventured to press her hand.

CHAPTER II.

THE WHART-RAT.

DOWN to the foot of Fifth Avenue glided the taxicab in which sat Barry Oliver, followed, at a distance of some fifty feet, by the vehicle tenanted by Lucy and Bob Tower.

Under the Washington Arch and through the Square, then to the right, zigzagging along the crooked and gloomy streets of Greenwich Village, until the first cab stopped along the curb in deep shadow, with the gates of a steamship pier facing it across the broad highway of the river-front.

The driver of the second taxi had been a "night-hawk" in the old hansom cab days; therefore, he had perfected "shadowing" to a fine art. As Barry Oliver's cab slowed down and stopped, the second one did the same, shutting off its lights and coming to a halt in a particularly dark part of the deserted street, twenty yards behind.

There had been little conversation between Bob and the girl. Both had been too intent on keeping the first cab in sight. There had been no remark by either as

to the reason of this sudden adventurous dash after Barry Oliver, but each knew that the other believed some unknown peril threatened Barry, whether he was aware of it or not.

"I thought Barry said he was to go to the gate in his cab to get that bag of laces," whispered Lucy, standing up and peering through the front window. "I don't understand why he is walking all that distance. Don't you think we ought to get out and follow him? Suppose somebody jumps from one of those doorways behind him!"

She pushed open the door of the cab, but Bob held her back.

"Nobody will attack him until he has the bag in his hand," he said—and there was a quiet force in his voice which Lucy, as a Western girl, knew meant the speaker was on edge. "Before that, we'll be close by. Barry saved my life once in Arizona. Do you think it possible that I would allow myself to be too late if he should need help? Ah, there he goes! He's knocking at the gate."

Barry stood close to the gate for two or three minutes, and Bob understood that he was talking to somebody inside, though he could not see at that distance. Suddenly Barry turned away and walked swiftly back to the cab.

"Has he got the laces?" asked the girl eagerly.

"No. Evidently he went to find out whether the bag was there before driving up," answered Bob Tower, his eyes fastened on the cab in front. "Yes. There goes the cab!" He spoke sharply to his own driver: "Wait till the other taxi is at the gate. Then go to the corner of this cross street. Get that?"

"Sure!" was the driver's easy response. "That all?"

"No, that's only the beginning," snapped Bob. "As soon as one of those gates opens, ever so little, you swing around and get as near the other taxi as you can—as if you were passing. But when you are close to it slow down. Understand?"

"I get you!" with a slow Mephistophelian wink. "That's the whole trick, is it?"

"That's all at present," said Bob Tower curtly. As an officer, accustomed to giving

commands, he resented the cabman's off-hand tone and manner. "But there'll be other orders later, and they may come at any moment. Be ready to pick them up like a flash. You'll have no time to think, mind!"

"Who's thinking?" rejoined the driver scornfully. "I never think. I have enough to do to drive and watch the traffic-cops without *thinking*. T' hell with *thinking*!"

Bob did not reply. He was occupied in following the movements of the other cab. To his surprise, the wharf gate opened wide and Barry's taxi went in.

Lucy placed an eager hand on Bob Tower's arm. Lord! How it made the hot blood leap within him!

"Barry said the man would bring the bag out to him, didn't he?" she asked. Then, apprehensively: "I hope there's nothing wrong."

"I don't think so. Just a little change of arrangements. You know what Barry said—that there's a lot of mystery around the shipping wharves these days."

She looked up at his face, faintly illumined by the street lights, and again she felt relieved to know that there was somebody with her who would be able to cope with the menace that neither had mentioned to the other, but which had prompted both of them to come on this seemingly uncalled-for trip.

There might be nothing, but if there were, then this young soldier would undoubtedly be as reliable as any of the rough-and-ready men of the plains with whom she had been familiar all her life.

Their cab, which had drawn up at the street corner, suddenly began to describe a wide circle, as Bob Tower had ordered, and they saw the other taxi coming out of the gateway.

Bob looked swiftly about the spacious thoroughfare. No vehicle was in sight save the two cabs, which were maneuvering like a pair of very wary boxers in a ring, going around each other without approaching.

Suddenly the cab containing Bob and the girl shot over toward the other, and the two were parallel, but going in different directions.

At the moment of passing, Bob glimpsed

Barry holding to him, on his knees, a large, yellow suit-case, which was, of course, the bag of laces. Barry had his cab to himself, and from the way he was guarding his precious bag, it was obvious he fully appreciated its value.

"What now?" demanded the hoarse voice of the driver through the window. "Did I slow down enough?"

"Yes," replied Bob. "Get back to the hotel, with the other cab in sight, the way you came down. There'll be a five-dollar bill in it for you, outside your fare."

Before the driver could reply, and simultaneously with a low cry from Lucy, Bob roared to the man to put on power.

"Get to that other cab!" he shouted.

"Don't you *see*?"

From somewhere—or nowhere—a low-built automobile, of the roadster type, had shot into the spacious square in front of the shipping pier, and was bearing down on Barry Oliver's taxicab.

"It's that same man!" cried Lucy. "Oh, stop him, please!"

"I'm going to," replied Bob Tower briefly. "Hurry up, you!" to his driver.

"Oh, what t' hell! How can I?" grumbled the cabman. "With that gink right in the way?"

The "gink" was the slim young man who had halted the page with the card for Barry Oliver in the café of the Hotel Supremacy, and of whom Lucy had spoken as hanging around her brother so much.

There was no mistaking the white-face, with its big nose, as they showed for an instant in the glare of his own headlights, when he swung from the motor-car and dashed for the taxi in which sat Barry Oliver, hugging his bag of rare laces.

The man had a light overcoat over his evening clothes.

He had engineered his car so that not only was it in the way of Bob Tower's taxi, but had stopped so abruptly that the other cab had run into it, though not very hard.

It was the noise of the collision that had startled Lucy Oliver. Then Bob saw that his driver was bottled up by the sprawling roadster, and he leaped out and darted after the big-nosed man.

It looked like a most audacious hold-up.

He saw the man, without waiting to see whether his machine was damaged, jump for the door of Barry's cab, fling it open, and dive inside.

But this was not all. Thieves seemed to be on all sides. Just as the big-nosed young man reached the cab door, another figure came suddenly into the open space from the shadow of the wharf building and hurled itself at the opposite door.

It was Lucy Oliver who first saw the newcomer, as she jumped from her cab to follow Bob. She had the faculty of quick observation, and at a glance she noted that he was short, of a wiry build, wore a flashily cut sack coat much the worse for wear, and had a bullet-head half buried in a hangdog-looking cloth cap. From beneath the vizor of the cap, sharp, ratlike eyes glistened in the blue-white light of an overhead arc-lamp.

Without possessing any first-hand knowledge of New York's underworld, the girl's instinct told her that this fellow was one of the human vermin that haunt the waterfronts of all large cities, the individual of which is known to the police as a "wharf-rat."

Before either Bob or Lucy could get to Barry's cab, there was a short cry that resolved itself into a groan, from within, followed by a scuffling that rocked the vehicle.

"Stay back there!" shouted Bob to Lucy.

He could not stop to see whether she obeyed him. He had other pressing business on hand.

Smashing his way into the taxi, Bob seized the collar of the big-nosed man's light overcoat with one hand, and raised the other, knotted into a formidable fist, ready for action.

Before he could strike, an agonized protest from his prisoner rang through the still night air.

"Hold on, Mr. Tower—one moment! You have the wrong man! I'm Mr. Oliver's friend!"

Bob hesitated, but held his fist ready, as he took a hasty survey of the scene in the cab.

Lying back in the seat, semiunconscious, was Barry Oliver, while the big-nosed one, who had been about to jump out of the opposite door when Bob Tower pulled him back by the scruff of his neck, lay helpless across Barry's knees.

"Where's that bag?" shouted Bob in a fury. "Tell me quick, or I'll pound you to powder, and arrest your remains afterward. Where is it?"

He gave his captive an admonitory shake that threatened to loosen all his teeth.

"I—I—" stammered the other, but could get no further.

"Don't lie! Tell me!" insisted Bob, more fiercely than before. "That bag was here a moment ago! Where is it?"

"Gone!" was the gasping reply. "Can't you see? Over there! Crossing the road!"

Bob looked out of the door, just in time to see the wharf-rat, the yellow suit-case swinging in one hand, disappear around the corner, where he was swallowed up in the darkness of the street down which the two taxicabs had come only a few minutes before.

The laces were gone!

CHAPTER III.

THE PATTERN PRINTS.

ONE look satisfied Bob that Barry Oliver was coming to himself, and he jumped out of the cab, in full cry after the insolent thief who had stolen the precious bag under the very nose of its owner.

But the fugitive knew his stamping-ground too well to be overhauled easily. Bob Tower never could say into which of the many dark entries—some with doors closed and others wide open—the fellow slipped. All he did know was that, after diving into three doorways in rapid succession, without hearing or seeing anything, he came out of the third one right into the arms of an extremely solid policeman.

"Hey, young fellow!" began the patrolman haughtily. Then, as he recognized an army officer's cap and uniform, his hand went up in salute. Still cautious, however, and taking nothing for granted, he awaited an explanation.

"I'm trying to find a thief, officer!" said Bob, his breath a little shorter than usual from his exertion. "He stole a bag from my friend in that taxicab down there, and came up this street."

"What was in the bag?" demanded the policeman, bringing a note-book from his pocket.

"A lot of rare, old laces, worth fifty thousand dollars," replied Bob, with some hesitation.

Down went this in the note-book. Then the policeman asked, even while he wrote:

"Got a description of the thief? Did you see him?"

"Yes. But we don't want the police to take up this thing. At least, I don't think my friend—"

"What's his name?" interrupted the patrolman brusquely, without looking up from his book.

"Barry Oliver. Owns a ranch in Arizona and a silver mine in New Mexico. Staying at the Hotel Supremacy," replied Bob, irritated at all this red tape. "My name is Tower—Robert Tower. I live with my mother, Fifth Avenue, near Seventy-Second Street."

As Bob gave his identity as the son of the late multi-millionaire, Robert Tower, the policeman looked up from his book and said, "Thank you!" He had not been outwardly impressed by the information that Barry Oliver was a very wealthy Westerner—as no doubt he was, being the owner of a ranch and silver mine—but when he knew that the young man before him belonged to the influential Tower family, why, that was different.

The policeman's tone was almost coaxing now as he repeated his question, "Can you give me a description of the thief?"

"A short, wiry young fellow, with a cap on, and he seemed to limp a little," replied Bob, adding: "I am not sure about his limping, but it looked to me as if he ran a little unevenly."

The policeman hastily wrote something more in his book, and remarked, with a satisfied grunt: "Kid Griffin! That's who it is. He's a boxer—a kind of a one. Goes on in prelims at some of the clubs around Tenth Avenue and Forty-Second Street.

Knocked off the platform one night and hurt his knee. Makes him wobble sometimes, when there's humidity in the air. Now—"

"Look here, officer," broke in Bob impatiently. "Don't make any move in this until you hear from me? Of course, if you get your hands on the bag, have it sent right up to Mr. Oliver at the Supremacy Hotel. But he doesn't want any publicity. I may say there will be a suitable reward—"

"That's all right, captain," broke in the officer, with a virtuous wave of the note-book as he restored it to an inner pocket. "I wasn't thinking about that. But the regulations require me to report anything on my post. If I see the Kid, he'll cough up that bag, you can bet on that," he added, with gruff confidence. "As sure as my name's Kelly."

"I guess it wouldn't be any use my hunting him myself around here?" suggested Bob, looking about him.

"Not a chance," replied the policeman. "There are twenty ways for the Kid to make his getaway if he went into any of these houses, and he might come out on any one of four streets. Still, you never can tell. I might—"

"Well, good night, officer—Mr. Kelly," interrupted Bob. "If you have anything to report, you'll remember it's Mr. Barry Oliver, at the Hotel Supremacy."

"Sure! Good night, captain!"

The patrolman clumped up the street, and Bob hurried down to rejoin Barry Oliver and Lucy. He could see the roadster behind the two taxicabs—they having extricated themselves from their tangle—so he felt pretty sure the long-nosed, slim young man had not departed.

As Bob came closer to the taxicabs he saw Barry hurrying to meet him.

"Didn't you get the fellow?" was Barry's eager question. "The durned coyote! Got me with my head down! Dropped me like a yearling calf under a sledge-hammer! I didn't know at first who it was struck me. Would have bet a silver-trimmed saddle it was Jones. But that was because I didn't see anybody till I came out of my trance, and then I had a flash of Lucy giving him

the evil eye. Holy cattle! She's got a look like a poisoned rattler when she don't like a man!"

"Jones? That's his name, eh?" observed Bob thoughtfully.

"Yep! William Jones. He has a bachelor apartment just a few blocks from the Supremacy, and he's often around the hotel. Independently wealthy! Comes from the South—New Orleans, I think he said."

"Ah! I wondered why I didn't know him if he was a New Yorker!" remarked Bob. Then, before Barry could speak, he added: "I was on the heels of the fellow with the bag, but he got away. I'm told his name is Kid Griffin."

"It is? Who told you?" came the instant question.

"A policeman. He'll be on the lookout for this Griffin and the laces on his own individual account, but I told him you would not want any publicity in the matter."

"That's right, Bob. You remembered what I told you about the Los Angeles banker who wants the laces, eh? Well, this Jones is a bright fellow, and he says he is going to get them back for me. See what you think of him."

"I will," was the dry response as they came up to the taxicab and found Lucy Oliver listening attentively to Jones's rather florid recital of what had taken place in the cab.

"There's the boy that got me!" cried Barry, pointing to a black object on the floor of the cab. "A man's sock half full of sand. Knocked me loco without leaving a mark. Why, it beats a gun in some ways, 'cause it doesn't make any noise."

William Jones gingerly picked up the sand-bag with the tips of his fingers and immediately dropped it in disgust.

"It's the kind of weapon only the lowest criminal would use," he declared, the end of his nose coming down over his hard mouth to express his loathing. "I know something about this kind of thing, because I have made a psychological study of criminals. It's a hobby of mine."

"Besides, I may say I have been fortunate enough to unravel two or three crime mysteries—working independently of the

police, of course—and I've done it by applying the simplest rules of common sense to circumstances more or less unusual. You follow me?" he asked of Bob, but with a corner of his eye on Lucy, as if to note what she thought of it.

"What were you doing in Mr. Oliver's cab when he was sand-bagged?" asked Bob Tower bluntly.

"That's very simple," answered Jones carelessly. "I had business in this part of the city—at one of the wharves—and was driving along, with my mind on my affairs, when I saw two taxicabs, one seemingly following the other. At the same moment a man came sneaking across the road in a way that could only mean mischief, and I saw that he was making for one of the cabs."

"On the spur of the moment I swung my car around, jumped out, and ran to the cab just as the scoundrel burst in the other door. He had delivered his blow at Mr. Barry, and I was trying to reach him when this gentleman—I have not the pleasure of knowing his name—grabbed me from behind. The thief got away!"

There was a mild suggestion of reproof, as if Mr. Jones were sure he would have caught the rascal but for Bob Tower's interference. But he added quickly: "Of course you did not know, Mr.—"

"Captain Tower!" supplied Lucy briefly.

"Ah! Thank you! Captain Tower did not know. He may even have fancied I was a thief—"

"I did," confirmed Bob Tower uncompromisingly.

"You are candid," said Jones with a sickly smile. "Well, to show Captain Tower how entirely he was mistaken, I have offered my aid to Mr. Oliver to run down the rascal, and he has accepted it."

"That's so," acquiesced Barry. "The only question with him was as to whether I could identify the laces. I've told him I could."

"How can you do that, Barry?" asked Lucy incredulously. "You never saw them until to-night. And you weren't inside the gates of the wharf long enough to examine them carefully. I know that, because Mr. Tower and I saw you go in and then come out again about five minutes afterward."

Barry shook his head wisely as he drew from an outside pocket of his light overcoat a flat package wrapped in brown paper.

"What's that?" demanded the girl.

"I'll show you."

Barry took the trouble to remove the wrapping in the powerful glare of one of the roadster's headlights, and showed his three companions a number of sheets of soft paper, on each of which was stamped in black a pattern of lace or embroidery. The patterns were of different sizes and shapes, and the designs varied also.

Lucy uttered an ejaculation of rapturous delight as she turned over the sheets and examined each in turn.

"Oh, here's a large collar!" she broke out ecstatically. "Isn't this perfectly dear! Just to think of the women in that far-off day being able to make this lovely lace! Better than we can do to-day, and it has lasted since. When was this made, Barry?"

Barry enjoyed his sister's admiration as much as he did the beauty of the laces—and, as an art dealer in the old days, he was a connoisseur, too.

"It was done in fifteen hundred and something," he replied. "I forget the exact date. Durn that ornery, cattle-stealing crook! The date of each piece of lace is sewed on it. But the thief has got away with the whole business, and I can only guess, within a hundred years or so, when the different examples were produced."

"Examples?" said Lucy. "Is that what you call them?"

"Art jargon, Lucy," explained Barry soberly. "Lordy! How the old talk comes back to me after all these years, when I get hold of such a collection as this. And to think that a dirty, little, sneaking crook has them at this moment! By the way, Lucy, that is the Catherine de Medici collar that goes to you. I know that one, anyhow."

"Goes to me?" almost screamed the girl, as her dark eyes sparkled with excitement, while a deep flush of disappointment spread over her dimpled cheeks. "And is that stolen, too?"

"It most certainly is," returned her brother, scowling, as he wrapped up the

pattern-prints into their original flat package. "You didn't think the contemptible skunk would pick it out and leave it, even if he knew it was to be your special property! Sneak-thieves aren't built that way!"

"Well, I've seen that miserable creature, and I should know him again. If ever I meet him, I'll—"

She clenched a little hand that could fling from the saddle, and had flung—a lariat seventy feet, stopping a two-year-old steer as dead in his tracks as if he had suddenly been spiked to the earth in all four feet. Kid Griffin, tough as he was, would assuredly have been impressed if he had heard Lucy Oliver's words and seen her blazing eyes at that moment.

And whether she suspected it or not, Lucy roped Bob Tower, as she said this, more securely than ever.

William Jones had observed, with an interest he could hardly conceal, that Barry Oliver replaced the package of patterns in the same outside pocket of his overcoat. Perhaps he was afraid Barry might lose them from such an insecure place. He said nothing about that, however. Instead, he purred in his most persuasive accents:

"If you will permit me to drive you back to the Hotel Supremacy in my car, Mr. Oliver, you can discharge your cabman, and we can talk over the case on the way."

Perhaps because Mr. Jones was so persuasive, Lucy stepped forward and placed her veto on the proposition in unmistakable terms.

"Mr. Oliver will go back with me—and Captain Tower," she ruled as she took her brother's hand. "Come on, Barry!"

Jones shrugged and smiled. Then, bowing to the girl and saying calmly, "I will meet you at the hotel," he climbed into his roadster and sped away.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRIEF MESSAGE.

BARRY OLIVER, Bob Tower, and Lucy, all had been, at least, half an hour in the gold-furnished, many-mirrored drawing-room, which, with a private dining-

room, a boudoir for Lucy, and two bedrooms made up the suite at the Hotel Supremacy, for which Barry said he was paying the price of a Dakota farm every twenty-four hours, when William Jones was announced, and a moment afterward entered with apologies which fairly dripped contriteness.

"I had an important letter to write," he explained suavely, "so was obliged to run around to my rooms for a few minutes. Then I left my car at the garage, which also took a little time. I can't tell you how sorry I am to keep you waiting."

The big nose dilated and contracted convulsively, and the numberless little lines at the corners of his eyes deepened as he spoke. His whole physiognomy expressed, in its own way, how desolated he was.

Barry Oliver bounced out of his chair, rolling an unlighted cigar over and over in his mouth, and strode up and down the room irritably.

"That's all right," he broke in. "The question is: What can you do about this robbery?"

"You give me full charge of the case—to trace the theft without interference from anybody?" asked Jones, eyelids drooping over his furtive, yellow eyes.

"Sure! The bridle's off the horse, and you can swing your rope as far as you like, so long as you round up these laces. See here, Jones! Let me tell you something about them that I haven't mentioned to you before. This bunch of laces is known as the Trevelyan collection, and there are other people after it besides my customer in Los Angeles."

The eyes of the pale-faced listener glistened, and the twitching of the long nose became more marked, though obviously he was trying to control his features.

"It is all the more desirable, then, that we should recover them at once," he purred. "Will you give me that package of pattern-prints?"

"What?"

Barry barked this, and a scowl of suspicion darkened his big, bronzed face as he champed savagely on his cigar.

"You see, I shall need something by which to identify the laces," protested Jones

silently. "Miss Oliver understands that, I'm sure," he continued, smirking across the room at Lucy. "I think you nodded, Miss Oliver. Did you not?" he asked.

"She did nothing of the kind," interposed Bob, unable to keep his tongue quiet, although he did repress an almost irresistible temptation to try the toe of his heavy army boot on the smirker's person. "It doesn't seem to me that you need those prints. If you have any idea of where the laces are, you will know they are Mr. Oliver's when you see them."

Bob Tower spoke in the incisive tones of a military man, biting off his words as he frowned at the propitiatory Jones.

Barry Oliver said nothing just then. But he brought the package of pattern-prints from his overcoat and spread them out loosely on the gold-legged marquetry table. All four of them gathered about the table and looked with involuntary admiration.

"Laces are very much alike to a person who has never studied them closely," remarked Jones, addressing Barry and Lucy and ignoring Bob. "I do not believe I should know these from any others of about the same design and general appearance. So far as I can see the patterns are not unique."

"The workmanship is, though," replied Barry. "My customer in Los Angeles would not be deceived for an instant by any imitations. As for the designs, they are different from any others in little ways that an expert can detect at once."

"And this customer of yours knows the designs?" queried Jones softly.

"Of course he does. He wouldn't be offering me sixty thousand dollars before he sees them," replied Barry grimly. "As a banker, he has a proper appreciation of the value of money, as well as of rare laces. He has seen the Trevelyan collection in London."

"Well, I hardly see how I can expect success unless I have the patterns," insisted Jones.

"Look at them well now," snorted Barry, still chewing at his cigar. "If you're smart enough to corral the thief and get the laces back, you ought to be able to carry the look of them in your head. I don't aim to

let these prints out of my hands. I need them so that I can run my brand on the laces when I put them side by side. I've got to hold them."

"Do you know who the other persons are who want the Trevelyan laces?" asked Jones carelessly as he bent over the prints.

"Haven't the least idea. But the purser of the vessel, who did the business for me in London and brought them over, was told by the owner—he's an earl, or a duke, or something, and he's selling a lot of his stuff to help his country win the war—that same wealthy American had cabled an offer to him. But I had the laces cinched, and the other gent, whoever he is, doesn't get 'em."

Barry pitched his mangled cigar into the open fireplace, and he didn't observe the fleeting grin of satisfaction in his questioner's pasty face as he admitted he didn't know who the "wealthy American" was. But Bob and Lucy both saw it and exchanged a quick look of inquiry. What did that grin mean?

"No," declared Barry positively. "I can't let you have the prints to take away. Look at them all you like here."

"Well," exclaimed Jones after a pause, during which he seemed to be studying the prints, "I shall have to do as well as I can without them! I'll say good night, and as soon as I have anything to report I'll let you know."

He had not taken off his overcoat, and, picking up his hat from a chair, he bowed in his usual extravagant fashion, tried to catch Lucy's eye and failed, and, flinging back defiantly Bob Tower's menacing glance, slipped out of the room.

"Say, Bob, what do you think of that citizen?" demanded Barry, taking another cigar from a box in the dining-room and coming back to gather up the prints. "Suppose he can do anything?"

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Bob. "He seems confident. Perhaps he knows more than he cares to confess."

Barry stopped in the act of putting the new cigar in his mouth and stared hard at Bob, as he said slowly: "You don't mean that you think this Jones is a crook?"

"I don't say that," was the cautious response. "Have you his address?"

"By the jumping Jim Jamieson, no!" ejaculated Barry, bringing his fist down on the table. "I forgot to ask that. He's living in bachelor-apartments not far from here, he told me, but I never thought to ask where. However, if he has anything to tell, he'll come, I guess. When he does, I'll—"

The telephone bell interrupted him, and he snatched up the receiver impatiently to bellow a fierce "Well?"

It was the hotel office announcing a caller. As Barry listened, his ruddy, tanned face seemed to lose a little of its healthy color, and Bob thought his voice shook as he sent down the order: "Bring him up!"

He put down the telephone and turned to Lucy with a blank expression.

"What do you know about that?" he gasped. "It's Colonel Coleberry."

"Good gracious, Barry!" she returned, her cheeks flushing with astonishment. "I thought he was in Los Angeles."

"So did I. But you never know what that old cuss will do. Now the fat's in the fire for sure." He turned to Bob Tower. "It's my man who is buying the laces. He asked me not to mention his name. But now he's here, of course it can't be helped. The colonel ain't the sort of man to hide himself when he's away from home."

Barry hastily put the prints in a drawer in the table and stuck the cigar, which had not yet been in his mouth, into a waistcoat pocket. Then he walked up and down, striking a huge fist into the palm of his other hand. He was worried, and, if he had been on his Arizona ranch, would have saddled up and ridden twenty miles into the hills to compose himself. As it was, he could only take the relief of an ordinary city man.

A knock at the door, a quick "Come!" from Barry as he walked over to welcome his visitor, and the next moment he was shaking hands with a well-built, elderly man of medium height, who stood very straight, and whose white mustache and imperial, as well as his white pompadoured hair, gave him a military aspect that was emphasized by his brusque manner of speech. A roar—as leonine as he could make it—was his ordinary tone.

"Hello, Barry! Didn't expect to see me, I suppose?" were his first words. "Down here for the Bankers' Convention. Didn't have to come, but thought I would. Mrs. Coleberry's with me. We're staying in this hotel. Where's my laces?"

"They're all right," jerked out Barry desperately. "Glad to see you, colonel!"

Colonel Coleberry pulled at one end of his waxed mustache fiercely.

"Don't lie! You're not glad. You don't care a damn about me, and I know it! All you want is to get the money for those laces, and then I can go plumb to—"

He caught sight of Lucy just in time, and, striding forward, held out his hand and gave her fingers a squeeze that he considered rather severe, but which had no effect on the girl's firm flesh.

"Glad to see you, Lucy!" he snapped out. "Yes, I *am* glad. Know why? Because you're pretty, and I like to look at pretty things. Jove, but you were an awkward, gangly youngster when I first knew you! But you've improved—wonderfully. That school in San Francisco has smoothed out the angles and made you a nicely-rounded, well-balanced young woman. You look more intelligent than you used to."

"Thank you, colonel!" laughed Lucy.

"By George, the dimples are there still, I see!" went on the colonel appreciatively. "How the devil do girls get dimples—that is, some of them? I never could understand—"

He broke off, and, bringing his heels together with a click, saluted. He had just seen Bob Tower, who came forward from behind the door at this moment, and who returned the salute with corresponding formality.

"Captain Tower, of the Field-Artillery!"

It was Lucy who introduced him, for Barry, worrying about the lost laces, had overlooked Bob altogether.

"The artillery, eh?" boomed the colonel. "Big guns! Well, well! They are the babies that'll tell in this war—those and the planes. I wish I were young enough to take a hand in it myself. But I'm a veteran of the sixties—Chancellorsville, Mission Ridge, Gettysburg—and I'm out of it now. They wouldn't even let me go to

Cuba twenty years ago. Talked about my being too old.

"Bah! A man's never too old to fight, if he feels like doing it. I'm seventy-seven, and I'd lick Barry here, if he got me mad, and he knows it! Where are those Trevelyan laces, Barry?"

He turned away from Bob and Lucy, and, throwing his broad-brimmed soft hat on a chair, glared at Barry savagely.

This did not mean that Colonel Coleberry was angry. Both as a soldier and banker he considered it good policy to be regarded as rough and gruff, that was all.

"Laces, colonel?" stammered Barry, his demeanor much less determined than usual. "Well—er—I didn't expect you here in New York. I intended to deliver them to you in Los Angeles."

"That's all right," snapped the colonel. "But you told me they would be in New York not later than the twenty-second. Here's the twenty-fourth. If I'm willing to take them now and pay for them, so much the better for you, isn't it? I'll have the responsibility of getting them to California, and that saves you some trouble. Where are they?"

Colonel Coleberry stroked his white imperial and twisted the ends of his mustache as he fixed a censorious eye on Barry. The colonel was accustomed to seeing his employees jump when he issued an order, and he carried the same ideas into his dealings with others when he could. The look he gave the ranchman now was calculated to burn up a person of at all a timid disposition.

But Barry Oliver was not timid, and now that he had recovered from the shock of his surprise at seeing the old fire-eater in New York, when he was supposed to be on the Pacific Coast, he was prepared to hold his own.

"The laces are not ready," he said quietly, but with a hint of mischief in his low, deep tones. "I'll have them in Los Angeles by the time I promised them."

"What the devil—" began the colonel furiously.

"Hush!"

Barry said this in a sharp tone, while he held up a warning finger. The interjection

and the gesture were too much for Colonel Coleberry. He sank into a chair and mouthed inaudibly. He could not find words that would fit his wrath.

Bob Tower and Lucy looked on in amazement, with some fear that the old gentleman would have a fit. But Barry Oliver knew him better, and he was not afraid of anything of the kind. So he went on coolly:

"There is no use your blustering, colonel. You know you're in the wrong—as a business man you know it, and as a soldier you ought to be willing to stand things going against you. If I have the laces ready for you before you leave New York, I'll let you know. If not, I'll deliver them in Los Angeles. Now, let's talk about something else."

He smiled. But Colonel Coleberry did not respond. Instead, he got up slowly, picked up his hat, and marched to the door. There he turned and said in choked tones:

"I'll be in New York a week, staying in this hotel. Let me hear from you soon."

"Perhaps in a day or two, colonel," was Barry Oliver's cheerful reply.

"Very well. Good night!"

He stalked out, but before the door closed was back with a labored smile, twisting his mustache and lifting his imperial to one side.

"Mrs. Coleberry will be glad to see you, Barry and Lucy, and you, too, Captain Tower," he said pleasantly. "Drop in on us to-morrow, won't you, and we'll have dinner together. I forget the number of our rooms, but the clerk will tell you. Good night!" And the door closed.

"Good night, you durned old blank cartridge!" laughed Bob Barry to the closed door. Then, turning to Bob, he added seriously: "All the same, I wish I could hand him those Trevelyan laces before he goes home."

There was a knock at the door.

"Jumping cats!" ejaculated Barry, "is he back again? Come in!" he roared.

It was a hall attendant, and he handed to Barry a small folded note.

"It's for Captain Tower," explained the man. "The clerk said he was in your rooms, Mr. Oliver."

Barry gave the man the tip he evidently was waiting for, and dismissed him, passing the note to Bob with the other hand.

Bob Tower read aloud all the words the paper contained, written in lead pencil:

"Donovan's saloon on that same street.
"KELLY."

CHAPTER V.

AT DONOVAN'S.

WHEN William Jones left the Oliver suite in the Hotel Supremacy he hurried out of the hotel and walked swiftly to a quiet thoroughfare not more than five blocks away.

It was in one of the cross streets off Fifth Avenue, and in the block where Jones stopped to let himself in with a latch-key there were all the evidences of its having been an exclusive, fashionable byway in the old days, some fifteen or twenty years ago.

But the brownstone houses, with their imposing entrances and stained-glass fanlights, had degenerated. They were now used as homes for single men, mostly clerks with modest incomes. Some of them were frankly boarding-houses, where meals were served at stated hours. All carried an air of down-at-heel gentility, and not one was anything like such an aristocratic edifice as Barry Oliver had been led to suppose sheltered William Jones's "bachelor apartments."

True, Mr. Jones had a bachelor apartment. But there are grades in such establishments, and this one was decidedly of the second or third-class, as such things go in New York.

Perhaps it was as well that the house was so modest since it fitted William Jones's appearance when he came out after being inside fifteen minutes, and in which short time he had shed all the magnificence of the evening-dress that had helped him to seem such a swell at the Hotel Supremacy.

In an unobtrusive dark business suit and soft hat he looked like any ordinary wage-earner in evening rig. He might have been a plumber, machinist, tailor—anything rather than the wealthy idler he had ap-

peared to be when he stopped the page with Bob Tower's card for Barry Oliver.

Walking over to Sixth Avenue he took an elevated train down-town. At Eighth Street he left the train and went in the general direction of the Hudson River, with the unhesitating gait of a man who knows his way and needs little light to help him.

He swung around corners, took short cuts by way of small "flatiron" streets, and once plunged into an open hallway and came out on an alley that saved him a couple of blocks. He was making good time.

Boldly and surely as he made his way along, William Jones was on the alert for possible followers, and he cast a quick look back occasionally with a skill in hiding the act which suggested his being used to such a precaution.

Finally he reached the rather forbidding street, gloomy and mysterious, ending in the river front, with a perspective of the ship-wharf gates, where the two taxicabs had halted earlier in the evening.

He stopped and listened. He was in front of a row of squalid brick tenements, all very much alike, with decrepit iron railings, rheumatic with rust, guarding the cellar basements and running up by the side of the rotting steps that led to heavy, carved doors—from which most of the paint had blistered off in an eczema of old age—giving upon black, sour-smelling entries.

So far as Jones could tell, after a few moments of intent listening and sharp-looking into the gloom, no one was on the thoroughfare, and he ran swiftly up the steps of the house behind him, which was at one end of the row. The hall in which he found himself may not have been more malodorous than the others, but certainly it was no better, and Jones had to hold his nose to keep from sneezing.

Stepping lightly he went through the hall, past the foot of the staircase, which took half the width of the passage, and stood for a moment listening at the head of a black hole which he knew was the way to the basement.

He had passed two doors on his way, but not a sound had he heard on the other side of them, and if there were people in the

basement they were all so quiet that he decided they had gone to bed.

At the very end of the hall, at the rear, was a door with a latch that could be opened from the outside, where a short flight of steps led to a noisome back yard, with a high board fence around its three sides.

But the fence did not delay Jones in the purpose he had in mind—and that he had a distinct purpose his actions all showed—for he went to the fence, and, thrusting his long fingers between one of the cracks, pulled out three of the boards, which, held together in a solid piece, formed a hidden door.

Through the narrow opening he slipped, closing the door behind him. There were no fastenings, reliance being placed on the fact that, unless one knew the secret, he would never suspect that there was a way of getting through the seemingly unbroken barrier.

Jones was now in another yard much like the one he had left. He stood there, in the almost solid blackness, waiting to make sure he was alone, when suddenly a shaft of yellow light shot across from the other side, and he was glad he did not happen to be where the light would strike him. He edged a little further into the darkness, however, and waited.

There was nothing to make him particularly afraid, for the person who came from the lighted doorway was only a little girl with pathetically thin legs and a very scanty frock, who carried a large tin pail.

She had been "rushing the growler." The doorway from which she came, and which she closed after her, led into Donovan's saloon.

This was the explanation of the secret door in the fence. The initiated used it regularly, and a thriving trade was done on Sundays and other forbidden days and nights with thirsty souls who had no respect for the law, and only dreaded the heavy hand of Officer Kelly and his colleagues if they should see what was going on.

Incidentally the fence door was handy for ladies and gentlemen living in the tenements who desired to purchase a can of

mixed ale now and then without proclaiming their indulgence to the world at large.

Jones remained in the shadow till the child had vanished through the fence with her pail of beer. Then he went over to the saloon door and entered.

He found himself in a small lobby at the back of the barroom, facing a staircase, which he was able to ascend without being observed by Donovan or his bartender.

Donovan's was doing a lively business that night. A large gang of longshoremen had just been paid off.

Up two flights went William Jones. There was a small gas-jet on each floor, and he had no difficulty in finding his way up the steep, uncarpeted stairs to the landing he wanted. A hall led to the rear, and down this he went on tiptoe.

The door at the end was locked, as he found out by softly turning the handle and pushing.

He rapped with his knuckles. There was no answer.

"The pin-headed boob!" muttered Jones to himself.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that no one was in the hall. But, as an added precaution, he slipped back and looked over the banister, where he had a view of the landing immediately below, as well as of the lobby on the ground floor. Both were empty.

He hurried back to the locked door and put his hand and knee against it in silence. Then, with a sudden shove, into which went more strength than one might have thought was hidden in his slim frame, he sent the door in, breaking away the lock as if it were an eggshell.

William Jones was not big-boned, but he was wiry. In his business he had found it convenient more than once.

As the door went in Jones leaped across the room and very rudely wrapped one of his long hands around the neck of a young man in a sack suit and cloth cap, who had ratlike eyes and a loose mouth, and who evidently had hastily grabbed a yellow suitcase from somewhere, as if he had meant to leave the room abruptly.

Jones noted that the window was open. He knew there was a fire-escape outside.

"You bra-less, pin-headed boob!" hissed Jones. "You'd double-cross me, would you?"

Kid Griffin dropped the suit-case and tried to wriggle loose. But, though the wharf-rat was no weakling, Jones had him at a disadvantage, and he could only remain on his knees, where the other had forced him, and swear sullenly:

"Aw, cut it out, will yer?" he snarled, with an accompaniment of many unrepeatable oaths. "What the hell do yer s'pose yer goin' to git out o' this? I'll hand yer a paste in the jaw when yer git off me neck!"

Jones momentarily tightened his hold, and the shifty eyes of Mr. Griffin jumped forward. Then Jones loosened his grip as he admonished the discomfited Kid in low, rapid tones:

"Where were you going with that suitcase, and what business had you to keep me out of this room just now? You knew who it was. I gave the right signal. Why didn't you open up?"

"It didn't sound right," was the sulky rejoinder. "You didn't have no reason to come breakin' in an' makin' me think the bulls was there. S'elp me, I thought it was Kelly!"

"Kelly?" repeated Jones, with a quick note of dread. "Why should he come up here? He hasn't anything on you, has he? He doesn't know anything about this job, unless—"

He hurled Kid Griffin around and transfixed him with his yellow eyes.

"Look here, Kid! If I thought—" He broke off and picked up the suit-case, placing it on the table. "Fix that door!" he ordered sharply. "You are handy enough with tools. Put a bolt on until you can mend the lock, and do it quick, while I look over this stuff."

The wharf-rat scowled as if inclined to disobey. But, thinking better of it when Jones made a move toward him, he opened the door of a large closet, in which were a box of carpenter's tools, together with kitchen utensils of various kinds.

This room, with its gas-stove, a cup and saucer, plates, and the fag-end of a loaf of bread on the table, and a cot-bed in one

corner, was evidently used as a dining-room as well as a bedchamber.

Kid Griffin went to the door, producing a bolt, as well as the tools he required, while Jones calmly lighted the gas-stove.

He went into the large closet, and, after rummaging about for a few moments, brought forth two flat irons, which he placed on the stove.

The wharf-rat eyed him askance as he measured the bolt against the door-jamb, with a gimlet in his mouth. He took the gimlet out to ask sneeringly:

"Goin' to git up yer laundry? Yer might iron me a couple o' collars an' a shirt while you have yer hand in," he added with clumsy humor. "Gee! You—"

"Fix that door and shut up!" was the short command, and the Kid turned to his task, but still with a furtive eye on Jones.

What Jones did was to take from an inside pocket a roll of paper, which, when he had spread it out on the table, revealed a number of sheets of black carbon inside the white sheets.

He examined the paper as if to see how much there was, and nodded contentedly as he opened the suit-case and brought out the Catherine de Medici collar, which he held up to the light of the gas flaring over his head. Then he drew forth, one by one, several other pieces of exquisite lace in various shapes, snacking his lips appreciatively.

"They're fine, sure!" he murmured. "Fine!"

"You bet!" assented the Kid unemotionally. "But it gits me why any one should go daffy over a gripful of crochet work. Sufferin' Mike, you can git as much as they is in that there bag for fifty cents up at the ten-cent store in Sixt' Avenue, an' it 'd look jest as good!"

Jones replaced the laces in the suit-case and walked over to the door.

"Hurry up with that bolt!" he commanded. "You can work quicker than that when you like. We don't want to have this door open just now."

"Aw! What's bitin' yer?" growled the Kid. "If yer think yer can do it any more faster, why, here's the tools. Git busy!"

Jones did not reply. Instead, he stepped out to the hall and listened, motioning to the other to keep silent. The next minute he darted back into the room, deadly terror in his yellow eyes, thrust the suit-case into the closet, and turned out the gas in the stove. Then he beckoned fiercely to the Kid.

"Bring those tools and come over here—quick!"

The bewildered wharf-rat gathered up the tools and bolt. Hardly had he done so when Jones seized him by the shoulders and hurled him into the closet, closing the door and turning the heavy wooden button.

Not content with that, he picked up a hammer and some long nails that the Kid had left on the floor, and quickly drove a nail in at the bottom of the closet door and two more at the side. He did not mean to let Kid Griffin come out until the door should be opened from the outside.

Hardly had he finished these hasty arrangements when voices sounded in the hall—voices that William Jones knew only too well—and immediately afterward there appeared in the doorway Barry Oliver and Captain Bob Tower, of the Field Artillery!

CHAPTER VI.

THE KID WANTS TO KNOW.

WILLIAM JONES was looking out of the window by this time, and it was not until Bob Tower said, with some excitement, "Who's that at the window?" that he turned around and smiled a welcome, followed by a doleful shake of the head.

"We're too late, I'm sorry to say!" Jones exclaimed, pointing to the open window. "He must have known we were coming and got away."

"Who? What are you talking about?" demanded Barry.

"The thief who stole those laces!" was the reply. "I didn't know you were coming. But I had private information that he might be in this house, and I hustled here at once after I left you in the hotel."

"What private information?" asked Bob suspiciously.

William Jones held up a deprecating hand and smiled protestingly.

"Well, never mind about that," was Barry Oliver's impatient interruption. "What I want to know is, where's that crook with the Trevelyan laces?"

"He went through this window," replied Jones. "But there's a regular maze of back yards, with openings from one to the other, and once he got down the fire-escape he could laugh at us. I broke the door open, and was just in time to see him, with the yellow bag—or suit-case—going down the fire-escape."

"By the time I got the door out of my way and reached the window he was out of sight. By now he is in one of his hiding-places along the wharf, or getting across the river in a skiff. I know the ways of these waterside rascals!"

Bob Tower regarded William Jones steadily and with strong disfavor as he asked:

"You didn't try to follow him through the window?"

"You came just as I was about to go through," replied Jones in a somewhat injured tone. "Not that I believe it would have been of any use. No, gentlemen! He's got away this time. But I'll get him, if you'll leave the case in my hands."

"I'm not leaving the case in any single pair of hands," growled Barry.

"In Arizona, when a gang of greasers come over the border to stampede my cattle, I use every man who can throw a rope or pull a trigger. I don't just leave it to my foreman, and tell him it's up to him—not by a durned sight! We'll all take a hand in this round-up, Mr. Jones!" Then, to Bob, with a shrug: "Well, Bob, we can't blame Kelly."

"Kelly!" was Jones's inaudible comment. Now he knew how it was they had come to Donovan's.

The two newcomers had advanced into the room and were looking around curiously. Barry touched one of the irons and withdrew his hand quickly with a swear-word.

"Damn that iron, it's hot!"

"Yes," said Jones smoothly. "In a place of this kind you often find hot irons."

"Why?" was Bob Tower's short query.

"To iron out marks on dry-goods, and especially silks, velvets, and laces," returned Jones promptly. "They use a certain acid, and when they put a hot iron over it it takes out the marks, so that nothing can be seen. It's wonderful! This fellow probably works the wharves and gets hold of a lot of imported stuff, so that he's in the habit of using irons."

"And you think he was getting the marks out of my laces?" said Barry angrily. "The pizen coyote! You're sure he took the bag with him?"

"I saw it in his hand as he went down the fire-escape and across the yard."

"And you couldn't have caught him?" threw in Bob quietly as he pulled at the nailed-up closet-door, after turning the wooden button. "I wonder what's in here—loot?"

"Well, not the laces, anyhow. I saw them go."

The deliberation with which William Jones made this remark conveyed nothing of the trepidation that had set his usually well-controlled pulses galloping and deepened all the little wrinkles in his sallow face. But, in his profession, in which he lived by his wits—and the comparative absence of them in others—William Jones had learned to hide his real feelings on most occasions. This was a ticklish moment, and he knew that he could pass it only by affecting the utmost unconcern.

Bob Tower continued to pull at the door and tried to loosen the two nails at the side with his fingers, but without effect.

"Let me try!" volunteered Barry as he twisted at one of the nails. "No," he grunted, after a moment or two of ineffectual labor. "They are in to stay. Oh, well! What do we care what's in there so long as it's not my laces? Now, Mr. Jones, what do you propose?" he demanded, swinging around to face the coldly-perspiring young man. "We had information that this fellow, Kid Griffin, would be in this house, and Donovan, down-stairs, told us which was his room."

"He did?" Jones blurted this out angrily before he could control himself. Then he added easily: "He didn't tell *me*. I had

to find this room without his help. You ask me what I propose," he went on. "I think the better thing to do will be to leave this place and hunt somewhere else. If you'll trust me with the case for this one night—even if it isn't the way Mr. Oliver runs things on his ranch," he added with a tinge of sarcasm, "I'll try to have some sort of satisfactory report by to-morrow."

Barry Oliver turned on him swiftly, and his gray eyes seemed to penetrate the soul of William Jones, so that he squirmed uncomfortably in spite of his assumed assurance.

"Have you any reason to believe you'll have such a report?" demanded Barry metallically.

"Yes. I am in hopes I can trace this man you call Kid Griffin to his hole. Then he'll give up the laces, or I'll know the reason why!" returned Jones with a snort through the big nose.

"Very well. I've no desire to embarrass you in your work," returned Barry in a quieter tone. "Bob, let's get out! We can't do anything here, that I can see, and if Mr. Jones has a clue of his own, we ought to let him follow it up."

Bob thought he caught a lightning flash from beneath Jones's heavy eyelids, as if this decision to let him alone would be of more importance than Barry Oliver suspected. But it was gone and did not come back, and Bob answered carelessly:

"I'm ready to go. Are you going up-town, Mr. Jones? There's room for you in our taxi, if you like."

"No, thanks!" he answered as he closed the window, and, giving a general look around the room, moved, with the others, to the door. "I'm going down to the wharves. I have friends there who might help me to trace this slippery customer of ours. Where is your cab?"

"At the foot of the street, near the place where that rascal held me up to-night!" answered Barry. "I wish he'd try it again—that's all."

William Jones smiled understandingly.

"No fear of his trying it twice—with you," he said. "I wonder he had the nerve to do it at all."

William Jones was always there with the

"salve," as he called it, when it suited his purpose. Barry Oliver was not a lover of flattery, but he agreed with this sentiment. He rather wondered at Kid Griffin's nerve.

When Barry and Tower had departed in their taxicab for the Hotel Supremacy, Jones walked up and down the river front for fifteen minutes before cautiously returning to Donovan's, and even then he went in by way of the adjoining tenement and through the fence, as he had done before. He did not trust Bob Tower, and it was just possible that that not easily satisfied young man might be watching to see whether he did return to the room.

But Jones found the coast clear, and, after asking Donovan, in a casual way, as he ordered a glass of beer, whether anybody had been there to see the Kid, and being told that no one had come except the "two guys" who went out with him (Jones) half an hour before, he drank a little of his beer—it seemed to be flavored with garlic—and ran lightly up-stairs.

It did not take him long to bring the claw-hammer from its hiding-place under the table, where he had thrown it, and draw the nails that secured the closet door.

As he flung the door open, Kid Griffin, his face red and wet with perspiration, came lunging out, murderously angry!

"What the hell d'yer mean?" was the Kid's first explosive question as he leaned against the table and breathed hard. "Did yer want to suffercate me? Don't yer know they warn't no air in that place, an' that I come nigh croakin'? Who was those guys you was talkin' to a while ago, an' where you been since?"

"Simmer down, Kid!" returned Jones shortly. "If you hadn't been so smart and tried to beat me, this wouldn't have happened. It was the two men who own this stuff you swiped—the one you beaned with the sock of sand, and Captain Tower."

"Who's Captain Tower? I don't know the mark. Anyhow, that ain't no excuse for stoppin' my wind in that cupboard," was the sulky rejoinder. "Now, what are you goin' to do?"

Jones had lighted the gas-stove again and touched the irons, which were cold by this time, with the tips of his fingers.

"I'll have to warm them up again," he grumbled. Then, turning fiercely on the whining Kid, he hissed: "Hurry up and make that door good. Get the bolt on. If you hadn't loafed on the job the first time this never would have happened."

The harried wharf-rat took his bolt and tools to the door, and labored to such good purpose that he had the door fastened with its new bolt by the time the irons were hot enough for use. He had not said a word during his task, contenting himself with a low, tuneless whistle, after the manner of most carpenters when they are busy. The Kid had learned that trade at the reformatory.

"Now, bo, I want to know when I git mine?" he burst out as he shuffled over to Jones, busy at the stove. "These here laces are as much mine as yours, an' I got a right to know how you're goin' to play the game."

"You won't make anything by tryin' to crowd me," replied Jones coolly as he laid the Catherine de Medici collar on the table, on a sheet of paper, with another one over it, and a carbon sheet on top of that. "If you'll be good, you'll make more money out of this job than you'd get as a 'dip' or by rolling drunks in two years!"

"If I thought you was tryin' to frame up somethin' on me," muttered the Kid with a sinister look at his companion, "I'd blow the gaff on yer in a holy second! If I was to tip off Macey Gibbons—"

"What's that?" sharply asked Jones. "Who did you say?"

The Kid did not answer, and William Jones went on with his task of taking carbon impressions of the Trevelyan laces.

But he was wondering whether he had really heard the name of a man who was his deadly enemy.

CHAPTER VII.

A POSSIBLE CLUE.

COLONEL COLEBERRY was in high feather as he welcomed his guests into his apartments in the Hotel Supremacy early in the evening following that in which Bob Tower and Barry Oliver had so nearly

taken William Jones and Kid Griffin by surprise in that up-stairs room at Donovan's.

The colonel had made a speech at the Bankers' Convention which the evening papers printed nearly in full, and he had talked Bob Tower to a standstill on military matters in the hotel lobby just before coming to his own suite.

It is true that he had won his controversial victory over Bob more by dint of noise than sound judgment, but it pleased him, anyhow.

Now, in evening clothes, with newly-waxed mustache and imperial, and his white pompadour sticking up aggressively, he was monarch of all he surveyed, and gracious as became a potentate who knew himself worthy of his crown.

"Hello, Barry!" was his greeting, with nothing left of the acrimony of the night before when he found the laces were not ready for him. "How are you, son?" He shook hands vigorously. "And Lucy! Gad, my dear, where *do* you get them?"

"What, colonel?" was her smiling response. But she knew what he meant, even before he roared out:

"Why, those dimples! Say, if I was the captain there"—he gave his left hand to Bob Tower while still retaining Lucy Oliver's white-gloved, slim fingers in his right—"I'd fight the whole German army alone for the sake of that one in the middle of your right cheek, and I'd pull the Kaiser's nose to be allowed to put my lips to it! Oh, by Jove, here's Mrs. Coleberry! Come out here, mother! You know Barry and Lucy Oliver."

Mrs. Coleberry—white-haired like her husband, but, although smiling, inclined to be taciturn—shook hands with Barry, kissed Lucy, and glanced inquiringly, as well as admiringly, at Bob Tower, who, she thought, looked very handsome in his army uniform.

The colonel hastily introduced Bob, and then the other dinner-guest was announced—Mr. Samuel Lewis.

Samuel Lewis was an art dealer and importer, and a particular friend of the colonel's, although Barry never had met him before. He was a middle-aged man, with a

square face, a mouth that turned down at the corners, and steady blue eyes. He was said to be one of the best judges of rare old laces in America, now that Barry Oliver's father had passed away.

The Coleberry private dining-room was just large enough and equipped with the perfection on which the Supremacy prided itself, and the dinner was promptly served by well-trained attendants. Colonel Coleberry had ordered that everything should be "right," and it was.

Lucy had to sit at the right hand of the host, and he made love to her all through the meal, though he was too thorough a man of the world to neglect his other guests. He carried most of the conversation, in spite of his sly attentions to the laughing girl, and with it all he contrived to eat a very good dinner.

"I'm seventy-seven," he proclaimed boastfully, "and I would be willing to bet a thousand dollars there is no better digestive machinery around this table. Know why? Hard-tack! That's what did it. For four years I had hardly anything else to eat when I was in the army, and I had the honor of telling General Grant myself, on one occasion—"

"Yes, the Trevelyan laces have a world-wide fame," Samuel Lewis was saying to Bob.

"What's that?" shouted the colonel, who had caught the word "Trevelyan." "You are right there, Lewis. And, did you know?"—he paused to chuckle—"that I'm the man who owns those same laces?"

"You, colonel?" cried Lewis, surprised out of his usual placidity. "I—I did not know that."

"Well, you know it now," roared the colonel, laughing uproariously. "Barry got them for me. Brought them from the other side on purpose. One of the reasons I am in New York is to take them home with me personally. Do you know, I get pleasure out of merely touching the bag that contains a treasure like the Trevelyan laces."

Lucy glanced anxiously at her brother. But Barry was composedly eating his ice-cream, and only nodded with a smile at Colonel Coleberry when the old gentleman mentioned his name. For all that could be

detected in Barry Oliver's demeanor, he might have had the Trevelyan laces securely locked up in the hotel safe, ready to turn them over to the colonel at any moment.

"These are the real Trevelyan laces, I suppose, colonel?" observed Lewis after a pause, during which Colonel Coleberry asked Lucy solicitously whether her ice-cream was all right, and playfully offered her a spoonful of his own. "They are the specimens that found their way over to New Mexico some two or three hundred years ago, and afterward, in a roundabout way, came into possession of the Trevelyan family in England?"

The colonel dropped his rather childish flirtation with Lucy, and became instantly the keen man of business that had made him a successful banker as he shouted across the table:

"Of course they are the real Trevelyan laces, Lewis. Do you suppose anybody would expect to ring in an imitation on *me*? I'd like to see the man who'd try it. No, sir. I am getting the real Simon-pure Trevelyan collection."

He looked at Barry Oliver, who nodded confirmation.

Samuel Lewis was not disturbed by the violent, bulldozing manner of the doughty colonel, and it was in a quiet, even voice that he remarked:

"You are 'getting' the laces? Does that mean, colonel, that you have not yet got them in your possession?"

"What the he—what has that to do with it?" bellowed Colonel Coleberry. "I know what they are. Barry says they are all right, and he knows. Even if he didn't, I do. Say, Barry, you told me this morning you have prints of the patterns," he broke off to say as he pointed a finger at him. "Couldn't you send somebody up to get them, just to prove to Lewis?"

"It isn't necessary," interposed Lewis. "I am sure, if you and Mr. Oliver say so, that they are genuine."

"Well, then," exploded the colonel, "what the blazes are you howling about? I have not yet had the laces placed in my hands. True! But Barry will deliver them to me to-morrow"—Barry winced—"and you can look them over, if you like. I

wouldn't make that offer to everybody. But you're an expert, and I'd like you to see them, just for your own pleasure."

Mrs. Coleberry had taken no part in this discussion about the laces. In fact, she had had no opportunity, for her loud-voiced lord occupied the floor practically all the time. But she had looked interested. In fact the colonel had promised that the laces should be hers when he got them, and she could wear any of them she liked. She was not a connoisseur, like her husband, but she dearly loved beautiful lace.

The subject of the laces dropped, for Colonel Coleberry suddenly thought of a funny story he had heard at the convention in the morning, and, as he said, it was too good not to be passed along. So he told part of it, forgot the climax, began all over again, and finally put on the story a tag of his own—painfully weak—to bring it to an end somehow.

"Suppose we go down to the lobby with our cigars," he proposed through the perfunctory laughter that followed his recital. "It is lively down there, and Mrs. Coleberry likes to see what New York women are wearing in the evening. Lucy enjoys giving Eastern duds the once-over, too, no doubt. Though," he added quickly, with the old-fashioned gallantry that went with the waxed mustache and imperial, "California women can give New York cards and spades when it comes to style!"

He patted his wife's shoulder, to remind her that the compliment was for her, as well as Lucy, and in a few minutes the whole party was in one of the gilded elevators going to the lower floor.

Lucy went into one of the crimson-shadowed reception-rooms—with dainty ivory-finished desks, well supplied with Supremacy monogrammed stationery, scattered about, and which were mainly reserved for the use of ladies—and dropped upon a sofa, to chat and to watch the generally gorgeously-attired people lounging about, while Bob Tower, the colonel, Oliver Barry, and Samuel Lewis stood in the spacious lobby smoking.

Colonel Coleberry had turned away to talk to a fellow-banker, and the two were deep in a dignified financial discussion, with

the colonel's voice far overtopping that of the other, when Samuel Lewis beckoned Barry Oliver and Bob Tower aside, with rather more concern than usually showed in his face.

"Have you the Trevelyan laces safe?" was Samuel Lewis's abrupt question as the three walked out of ear-shot of the colonel.

The query was addressed to Barry Oliver, and the steady blue eyes were fixed penetratingly on Barry's face. Barry returned the look, as if he wondered the reason for the interrogation. Then he replied slowly:

"No. They have been stolen!"

There was a pause, and Barry and Bob both regarded curiously the unreadable, square face of Samuel Lewis, waiting for him to say more. He spoke at last, and though his tone was low, there was a slight tremor, as if he were trying to keep his voice even with some difficulty:

"I thought so when the colonel said to-night that he had bought them, but that they had not yet been delivered."

"But, Mr. Lewis," broke in Barry excitedly, "what about the laces? Do you know anything about them? As an art dealer and importer, and an expert—"

"Exactly. You are right," interrupted Lewis, still quietly. "They *have* been offered to me. Moreover, I have agreed to take them, and I have a customer. I expect to have the Trevelyan laces to-morrow."

"What do you mean to do?" asked Barry, after a short silence.

"What *can* I do?" was the rejoinder. "Naturally I do not intend to buy stolen property. I am much disappointed, I confess. It was a pleasant surprise to me when I heard the Trevelyan collection was in New York, and I let my customer know at once. She had commissioned me to get them for her, and I had been in negotiation with the owner in England, but had failed. They told me by cable that the laces had already been disposed of, but did not say where."

"Who offered the laces to you?" threw in Bob.

"I have never seen the person, and I do not know his name, or who he is. But he sent me carbon impressions of the laces to-

day—of some of them, that is—and I recognized them immediately. I have seen the originals in England. I am to put an advertisement—a personal—in a New York paper to-morrow morning—just the words 'Tryan—Yes,' if I am willing to purchase, or 'Tryan—No,' if my answer is in the negative."

"I see," commented Bob. "He uses the beginning and the end of the word 'Trevelyan.' He's too cunning to take the whole word. 'Trevelyan' would be altogether too obvious. Do you mind putting the advertisement in—'Tryan—Yes,' accepting the offer?"

"That's what I was going to suggest," answered Lewis thoughtfully, as he flicked off the ash of his cigar. "But what will come after that, of course, I don't know. Probably it will lead to my seeing the man, and then—"

Bob Tower interrupted, smilingly.

"If you will keep in touch with Mr. Oliver—or me," he said. "I think we can attend to the rest of it."

"Bully idea!" was Barry's explosive assent. "And if I don't knock his block off before giving him to the police, may I turn my ranch into a measly sheep-farm! The infernal thieving coyote!"

"Then I'll see about inserting the advertisement," promised Lewis, with a ghost of a smile. "I'll call you up when I hear anything. You're living at the Supremacy, I believe, Mr. Oliver?"

"Yes, and I'll be here all day till I hear from you. Unless I come to your place," he added tentatively. "I know where you are, in Fifth Avenue."

"Better not come until I communicate with you," objected Lewis. "This fellow, whoever he is, may have somebody watching. He is no ordinary crook, I should say, from his methods—and also from the fact that he has been able to get away with such valuable loot as these laces. By the way, have you any suspicions as to who the rascal is?"

Barry glanced involuntarily at Bob Tower, but before the latter could answer, Lewis went on hurriedly: "Never mind. That's your own affair. Here comes the colonel, and he's bringing somebody with him."

As Samuel Lewis and Barry Oliver walked toward Colonel Coleberry in response to his boisterous, "Come here, boys! I want you to meet Judge Lipscomb!" Bob Tower hung back, to look into the reception-room, where Lucy was sitting with Mrs. Coleberry.

Bob had just reached the portiered doorway when he saw a rather large messenger-boy in uniform slouch up to Lucy and hand her a note.

The girl, after scanning the paper hurriedly, went over to a desk, wrote a few lines on a sheet of the hotel paper, sealed it in an envelope, and gave it to the overgrown messenger, who slipped out of sight much more expeditiously than his kind usually move.

Bob was debating whether to go over to her or not, when she settled the question for him with a scarcely perceptible movement of her head, beckoning him to her side.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SINISTER TRYST.

BY the time Bob had walked across the heavily carpeted floor—and it did not take him long—Lucy had excused herself to Mrs. Coleberry and was sitting at one of the ornate desks further away than the one where she had written her note, with the light of the shaded lamp bringing out the glory of her flame-gold hair and playing hide-and-seek with her dimples.

For a moment he stood behind her, his heart beating furiously as he noted the delicate curve of her white neck, where red-gold tendrils, like vagrant chrysanthemum-petals, played amorously, and he clenched his fingers to hold them back from the sacrilege of touch.

It was but a passing impulse—the old Adam that has tormented lovers since the first garden—and then he took the hand she offered and was grateful.

Her smile was inviting—for it was that of a woman in difficulties—and he bent down until his face was so close to hers that he felt the gentle warmth of it, while the subtle perfume of her welled up and intoxicated him.

"What can I do?" he asked, steadying his tones with a mighty effort. "Anything the matter?"

"Not exactly," she answered, and her smile gave way to a look of anxiety. "But I'm perplexed. Will you read this?"

She handed him a yellow telegraph-blank, on which was scrawled, in a very bad, unformed hand—the writing of an illiterate person, or of one who seldom used a pencil—this laconic communication:

bring 50 dollars to brige 155 st ovar polo
growns at 10 to nite an i wil giv yu 1 big lase
come aloan walk on brige i will see yu dont
tri to put annythin ovar on me i wil kill yu
tel boy yu wil do it i can sel all other lases
to yu if yu sa so.

There was no signature and it was not addressed to any one. The messenger appeared to have been instructed to give the paper to Lucy Oliver, and evidently he knew her by sight.

Bob Tower read this precious note over twice, frowning. The girl looked up in his face, trying to read his thoughts, and he saw that the trembling of her ripe lips made the dimple at the corner come and go pitifully.

"Damnt!" was his first word. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" he added, distressed. "But actually this scoundrel—"

"I know how you feel," she laughed softly. "I should like to have said it myself. Thank you!"

He looked earnestly into her dancing eyes, but he did not laugh.

"Of course you can't go," he said, when he had read the message over again—for the absence of punctuation, as well as the spelling, made it difficult to comprehend. "It's a transparent trick, and it ought to be possible to run the blackguard down without your appearing in it. I can guess who sent this thing."

"So can I," she said quietly.

"No doubt it was Kid Griffin, the blackguard who stole the laces from Barry's taxicab. I've heard since that's his name. Well, I'll go after him."

"But—I'm going," was Lucy Oliver's unexpected announcement—and Bob knew her well enough by this time to know she would have her way. "I said so in the answer

I gave the messenger. But," she added, in a whisper, as she put her hand on the desk where he could cover it with his own. "You may go with me if you like."

"I intend to go, whether you do or not," he answered gravely.

She saw the love light in his eyes, and from that moment she *knew*.

There was a pause, which had no explainable reason, but which was as inevitable at that moment as if both had been suddenly stricken dumb. Then Bob asked thoughtfully:

"You didn't think to notice the boy's number, did you? You're sure he was either Western Union or Postal?"

"I didn't notice. He was in the regular uniform of a messenger. Why?"

"I saw him, and he looked different from most of them somehow," mused Bob. "Of course I could find out by making inquiries at the branch offices of the companies. But that would take time, and I don't think it matters." He looked at his watch. "It's past nine. Will you wait here while I speak to Barry?"

He moved to leave her, and she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"What is it?" he asked, and it was remarkable how the determination he had formed to tell her his secret within twenty-four hours put a new note into his voice. "I won't be away a minute."

"You are not going to tell Barry, are you?" she pleaded. "He's so headstrong. He'd want to go to that bridge himself, and I'm afraid he'd only scare the man off, and we never should get the laces."

"I won't tell him anything except to ask him to trust you with me for an hour or two," replied Bob, adding still more softly: "You will trust me, won't you?"

The brightening of her eyes and the quick flush that brought the dimples with it were assurance enough. But she whispered—and her confiding tones set all his pulses throbbing tumultuously: "You are the only person I *can* trust—now."

"And God helping me," he returned, brokenly—for his voice was beyond his control just then—"I'll be worthy of every trust you place in me—Lucy."

He would not trust himself to look in

her face when he had thus spoken her name, but lightly touching the back of her hand with the tips of his fingers, he hurried away to find Barry.

Fortunately Barry was alone, for Colonel Coleberry was talking to some one else, while Samuel Lewis was smoking on a sofa by himself.

"Hello, Bob!" was Barry's loud greeting. "Where have you been? Thunder! I'm sick of New York! Wish I were going back home to-morrow. If it were not for those confounded laces, I'd strike out hell-split for Arizona on the morning train."

"Listen, Barry!" interrupted Bob, and his manner and tone told Barry that something had turned up. "I want to take Miss Oliver for a taxi ride. You don't object, do you? It's a beautiful night, and—"

"Hold on there, Bob!" broke in Barry, fixing his green eyes on the other. "You don't expect me to believe that Lucy wants to go riding alone with you just for pleasure? I know Lucy. She's free enough out home. But she's been at that school in San Francisco, and she knows what's what in cities. She'd have asked Mrs. Coleberry to go along as a chaperon if it was just a joy-ride you had in mind." Then, as the thought came to him: "Perhaps Mrs. Coleberry is going?"

"No. I want to take Miss Oliver alone," replied Bob coolly. "But you are right, Barry. It is not only as a pleasure ride that I want to take her." He whispered cautiously. "It is in connection with the Trevelyan laces."

"What?" roared Barry, so loudly that Colonel Coleberry and several other persons turned involuntarily. "What have you found out?" he added in a low tone. Then positively: "I'll go, too."

"That's just what you must not do," returned Bob Tower firmly. "Lend me a soft hat and your light overcoat. I don't want to wear my military-coat or cap. I'll be breaking the regulations in not wearing my full uniform, but I have to do it. Have you the things down here?"

"No, they are in my room. Come along."

Barry Oliver was a man of quick decision, and he walked toward the elevator as he told Bob to come. The latter nodded sig-

nificantly to Lucy as he passed the door of the reception-room. She glided out and whispered:

"Bring me that dark cloak I wore when I went with you to follow Barry last night. He'll know where it is. He'll let you go?" she added anxiously.

"Yes," was Bob's hurried reply as he hastened to the elevator after Barry.

Half an hour later, Bob Tower, with a long coat of Barry's covering his uniform, and a soft hat replacing the telltale military officer's cap, was talking earnestly to Lucy in a taxicab as it left Central Park at One Hundred and Tenth Street, and made its way, slowly—by Bob's orders—toward Eighth Avenue.

He was thinking that the dimness of the cab detracted nothing from the girl's beauty.

Lights from the stores and street-lamps shone on her clear, pink-and-white face, and sent thrusts of extra brilliance into her eyes—eyes that were turned upon him most of the time.

With the lace shawl thrown back from her forehead, making a tangle of golden-red where the threads had caught her hair, the black cloak falling open, to reveal the carnation-pink corsage, with its elusive wide opening amid the mist of laces, and the soft silk skirt that ended in white slippers and ravishing pink hose, what wonder that Bob Tower found it difficult to marshal his plans for the capture of a dirty wharf-rat!

He came to himself with a jerk, as he said, with rather strained briskness: "I'll leave you at a Hundred and Forty-Fifth Street. I don't like to do it, but it is the only way." He paused, but she only showed him a maddening, thin, white line between her lips as she smiled acquiescence. She was entirely in his hands, and evidently was content. He continued: "The taxi will take you to Amsterdam Avenue, and so to One Hundred and Fifty-Fifth."

His voice trailed away. Deuce take it! How *could* he keep his mind on such sordid matters as running down a sneak-thief, with those glorious eyes flashing on him, and that opening in her low-cut evening-frock showing the white bosom heaving softly with the unsullied emotions of a perfect womanhood?

But he clenched his teeth and got a grip on himself, just as she, smilingly, asked what she was to do next.

He begged her pardon hastily, and took up his instructions steadily where he had broken off.

"When you get to the end of the bridge nearest Amsterdam Avenue," he said, "leave the cab and walk forward. No doubt the fellow will be watching from some dark corner, to see whether you are alone. Tell the cabman to wait. I've already arranged with him to do as he is told, and he is to have double fare, with something extra, if he makes no mistakes."

"But where will you be?" she asked, the sensitive lips parting in sudden apprehension. "I'll hardly know how to proceed any further by myself, you know."

"By yourself!" he repeated in tender reproach. "Can you think for a moment that I won't be within reach? That would be a gallant, knightly thing to do, wouldn't it?" he added with a light laugh at the absurdity of such a possibility. "I shall be there."

"But you are to leave me at One Hundred and Forty-Fifth and Eighth Avenue. I wish you could go all the way with me."

Right there was danger of Bob Tower's elaborate scheme all going agley. She wished he could remain with her in the cab! That was what she meant, and what she had said, in plain words.

And ever since the cab had left the Hotel Supremacy he had been wondering within himself, as he glanced from time to time at her eager face in the enveloping black lace, whether it would be too soon to tell her what was in his mind.

Bob Tower was an impetuous lover, but he could not forget that he had met this girl only the day before. Yet that he had fallen head over heels in love with her was a fact that would not be denied.

What was he to do? He tried to adjust matters by reflecting that he had known her years before, when she was little more than a child. Somehow, that did not seem to help, and he gave it up for the time being.

"I wish it were possible for me to remain in the cab with you," he murmured. "You must know that." His voice trembled.

"But it would spoil my plan for trapping the thief."

"I see," she whispered obediently. "Well, please tell me what I am to do."

"You can depend on my being near when you need me. When you walk on the bridge, the thief, after making sure you are alone in the taxi, will follow you—probably some distance away. Don't let him catch you until you are near the top of the stairs that run down to the Elevated railway. It will be on your left as you walk along—the north side of the bridge."

"I don't know the locality at all, remember," she interrupted gently. "I never was in New York before."

"You can't mistake it," he assured her. "If I were not certain of that, I wouldn't let you do this—for a million dollars' worth of laces!"

She smiled mischievously into her face.

"You must think I'm very valuable. A million dollars! Is any girl worth that?"

It was a direct challenge, and, as has been remarked, Bob Tower was impetuous, especially in obeying the promptings of his heart. One of her small hands was smothered in his, as he bent so low that the crinkly red-gold hair brushed his eager face.

"Lucy!" he whispered. "If a girl was not worth more millions than could be told to the man who tells her he loves her, then she should not believe him."

There was silence for perhaps half a dozen heart-beats. Then she answered softly: "I think she should know something about the man before going so far as that."

She did not try to withdraw her hand, and he felt that the gentle billowing which had kept the misty lace over her bosom rising and falling rhythmically had quickened to a stormy throbbing. But she hid her face by turning it away.

"Lucy!" he said, in rapid, earnest tones. "You knew me six years ago, when I used to help you with your lessons, on the ranch in Arizona, and I used to call you my little sweetheart, and try to kiss you."

"I remember." Her voice was barely audible. Then, with a nervous laugh: "But I never let you do it. And—won't you please talk about something else—just now? I'm—I'm—"

She did not finish. But he knew that she was thinking hard, and that it would be better to wait a little before asking her to say a word that few girls are willing to utter too readily. He removed his hand from hers.

"You are not angry?" he asked eagerly.

"No," she returned, very softly. "I am not angry. Please tell me what else I am to do on the bridge."

"When the man catches up to you," he replied in a quieter tone, "keep on walking and ask him to show you the lace he has for sale. He'll probably bring it out then. *Make sure it is part of the Trevelyan collection.* That will give you an excuse for prolonging the interview, during which you will be getting nearer to the head of the Elevated stairway. Do you think you can remember the patterns as you saw them in the carbon prints?"

"I am sure I can," was her confident answer. "That is, I'm certain I shall recognize them if I see them again."

"Good!" he exclaimed with an admiring chuckle. "Though I'm sure I don't know how you can do it. Laces all look pretty much alike to me."

"But, after I've seen and identified the lace, what then?" she asked. "Am I to buy it?"

"Yes, you must do that, or he might become suspicious. Oh, by the way—the money!" He took out his pocketbook from inside his military tunic. "Give him the full fifty dollars—but not before he has handed you the lace, of course."

She nodded her understanding. Then, as Bob thrust a roll of bills into her hand, a sudden thought came to her, and she said reprovingly: "This is your own money, I'm sure. Why didn't you get it from Barry?"

"I couldn't ask him," he returned shortly. "That would have told him what we were going to do, and he would have shouted, 'Blackmail!' and made a lot of fuss. But don't trouble about that. We'll get this money back from the thief. If we don't, I'll tell Barry."

"Mind you do," she counseled, and the touch of authority in her voice was of that peculiar quality you only hear from wives to their husbands—or from a girl to the

man whose engagement-ring she wears, or knows she will wear. "The cab has stopped," she added with a swift change of tone. "Is this the corner?"

"Yes," was his answer as he leaned over her to give his parting instructions, his lips so close to her shell-like ear that they touched it—accidentally, of course. "You understand what you are to do?" he added anxiously. "Leave the cab slowly. But, once on the bridge, walk as swiftly as you can, without actually running."

"I understand."

She gave him her hand, and, as he took it, he looked into her telltale eyes at such near range that the fragrance from her gently parted lips remained with him after he had whispered "*Au revoir!*" and left her.

He was still conscious of the subtle perfume of her when she waved a farewell from the cab-window, and afterward, as he stood waiting for a trolley-car to take him to the rendezvous.

CHAPTER IX.

UP AGAINST IT.

AND the girl? In the solitude of the cab she laughed aloud—a little tinkling laugh that was glorified by a world of tenderness. The laugh was followed by a sigh, but the veriest tyro in the study of sighs would have known it came from a glad heart.

Her cab made good time, and it seemed that, after getting into Amsterdam Avenue, it was only a few minutes until it swung around the corner eastward at One Hundred and Fifty-Fifth. Then it stopped, and the driver croaked through the front window:

"Shall I go to the bottom of the hill?"

"Is there a hill?" she returned. "I didn't know. I want you to stop at this end of the bridge. Then I'll get out. Go slowly now, please."

"Right-o!" was the response.

The cab crawled slowly down the little grade, and, crossing St. Nicholas Avenue, came to a halt near the garage at the bridge end.

Lucy drew her lace shawl closely over her head, and with her cloak hiding the shim-

mery dress beneath, she peered into the gloom looking for the man she was to meet.

She saw nobody. So far as she could discern, in the uncertain moonlight, the bridge was entirely deserted. If the man who was to offer the lace for sale were anywhere about, he was in hiding.

Very slowly she got out of the taxicab and went forward to speak to the driver.

"You will wait," she said, authoritatively. "You have been instructed to stay till I come back, I believe?"

"That's all right," answered the man in a husky whisper. "I'm wise. You'll find me here when you want me."

He leaned back in his seat, and, lighting a cigarette, puffed away with the serene enjoyment of one with whom things were going well. The starter at the hotel had told him who Bob was, and then had wished him "good luck!" in a way which conveyed the conviction that the good luck was already his. Members of the wealthy Tower family could afford to pay well for service—and they had the reputation of invariably doing so.

Lucy crossed over, and once on the bridge, quickened her steps without looking to right or left. She was wondering where and when Bob would appear.

"I shouldn't be surprised to find that he is watching me even now," she thought, and the conviction that he was protecting her, even though unseen, shed a warmth over her that made her strange adventure pleasant rather than otherwise.

Not many yards had she gone on the bridge when her quick ear detected the shuffling of badly shod feet behind her. The flippety-flop cadence suggested loose, worn-out soles, and heels that were not what they should be. She had heard such footsteps in San Francisco, and they were connected in her mind with seedy, wobegone individuals who begged for "two bits" to get a bed or a meal.

She walked faster. As she did so, the person behind also hurried, and she feared she would have difficulty in reaching the little house on the bridge—which she supposed was the entry to the Elevated stairway Bob had told her about—before her pursuer caught up with her.

"Hey, there!" panted a high, rather breathless voice behind. "What t' hell d' yer t'ink yer doin'?"

Lucy did not slacken her pace or look around. She knew now that the thief who wanted to sell her the stolen piece of lace was close at her heels, but she would lead him on as far as she could. Bob Tower had not given her that injunction for nothing.

"Hey! You! Let up, will yer? Stop when I tell yer! I'm the guy you want ter see! Wait a minute!"

There was menace in the shrill tone. She would have to stop soon, or give up the chance of recovering the lace altogether.

She saw that the stairway was not more than a hundred yards away, and she turned to look at the person who had hailed her.

One glance, even in the fading moonlight, told her that he was the messenger boy who had brought the note, and to whom she had entrusted a written answer.

He grinned as he saw her start, and as he came up to her side, remarked with a chuckle:

"Gits yer goat ter find you had me in that hotel, where you could have pinched me wit'out any bother, don't it? But I used to be a messenger once—for a mont', an' I knowed the game all right, all right. I knowed I could put it over, an' I did. Now, got th' jack wit yer?"

"What?" asked Lucy as she quickened her step, taking the wharf-rat with her—for it was Kid Griffin, of course. "I don't understand."

"Aw! What t' hell yer givin' me?" he growled disgustedly. "Can't yer understand United States? The cash, the coin, the money!"

He held out a dirty hand, and she noticed how frayed was the cuff of his uniform coat, suggesting that it was one that had been thrown aside as too ragged for service, and had been picked up by the Kid cheap for his present scheme.

"Come across now!" he urged angrily.

By this time Lucy had calmed down, and was prepared to carry out her part of the proceedings as Bob Tower had instructed her. So she turned on the Kid with a sharpness that surprised him, as she said sternly:

"Where is the lace?"

"Oh, I'll give it to yer," he answered. "You don't need to worry about that. I got it here in me kick. Where's de fifty?"

"When I've seen the lace and know it is part of the lot you stole—"

The Kid held up a warning hand and uttered several oaths below his breath as he looked around apprehensively. Then he growled:

"Hush up! Ain't yer got no more sense than to say a t'ing like that when yer don't know who might be lis'enin'? If you wasn't a lady, I'd hand yer a swipe in the jaw! S'help me! I will, anyhow, if yer make anot'er crack like that!"

"Show me the lace," was Lucy's only response to this tirade. "You shall have the money afterward, if we come to terms."

"We'll come ter terms all right," snarled the Kid. "Or I'll chuck yer over the bridge. You ain't in no hotel now, wit' guys standin' around ter help yer." But even as he spoke he knew she did not fear him. "Here's yer lace."

From his trouser-pocket he dragged a crumpled mass and spread it out in the light of the lamp at the head of the stairway. It made Lucy shiver to recognize, in this soiled, wrinkled pile, the priceless Catherine de Medici collar that her brother had promised should be her very own.

Fifty dollars! It was worth more than a hundred times that paltry sum!

She clasped the precious collar to her bosom with one hand, and dragged from an inside pocket of her cloak the fifty dollars.

Kid Griffin stretched out his hand greedily—and found his wrist trapped by four powerful fingers, and a thumb like spring steel, while a man's voice said distinctly in his ear:

"Give up the rest of those laces or I'll hand you over to Kelly!"

The Kid seemed to shrink in his ill-fitting uniform. He did not speak.

"Oh, Bob!" burst involuntarily from Lucy. "How splendid of you to be here!"

The Kid looked up hastily in surprise as Bob Tower uttered a cheerful, joyous laugh—a laugh that the wharf-rat felt instinctively had no connection with his own arrest. But he was quick to take cunning advantage

of his captor's display of evident pleasant humor.

"Leggo my arm an' I'll tell yer jest how it was, cap!" he whined. "An' I'll lead yer ter them ot'er laces, too. I've had it put all over me, an' I'm goin' t' squeal, if they croaks me fer it. An' that's 'cross me heart an' wishermaydie!" he added, with the solemnity of one making an affidavit.

"Shut up, you—you rat!" ordered Bob, his gaze fastened on Lucy's flushed face and dancing eyes. "This fellow has not hurt you in any way, has he?" he asked, eagerly, as he gave Kid Griffin a casual shake. "If he has—"

Lucy Oliver smiled scornfully at the question.

"I never said a word to th' lady that was out o' th' way!" broke in the Kid, in his shaky treble. "The lady herse'f will tell yer that. Won't yer, lady?"

"Officer Kelly wants you, very badly," remarked Bob in a reflective tone as he looked at the squirming Kid. "I guess I'd better turn you over to him." Then, suddenly changing his tone, he thundered: "Where are those other laces?"

"I ain't got 'em," shrieked the Kid. "But—but—I can tell yer how to get 'em."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know where they are to-night. But I know where they will be, p'raps to-morrer, but maybe not till the day after. An' that's as true as I live, 'cross my—"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Bob. "I dare say you'd lie as easily across your heart as any other way. You say you don't know where the laces are now?"

"That's the Gord's truth, cap!" came hysterically from the wretched Kid. "If I knowed where they was, I'd take you to 'em right away. I'd love to do it. That big cop, Kelly, couldn't make me say no more than *that*."

Bob gave him another shake, and this time it was hard, and not at all casual.

"If you don't know where the rest of these laces are, how did you come into possession of this one you were trying to sell to Miss Oliver?" he demanded. "You are lying, and you know it."

"S'help me, I ain't no sech a t'ing!" protested the Kid, in an injured tone. "An' I

you'll take yer fingers off'n my arm, so I can git me'breath, I'll tell yer all about it."

"Go ahead, then!" ordered Bob, loosening his clutch on the fellow's wrist, but not taking his hand away. "Speak quick, too."

"Well, the truth is, I swiped this here lace from the mug as has the rest of the stuff. He was givin' me the finger, an' I beat him to it."

"Who is the man—this mug, as you call him?" asked Bob, tightening his hold again.

But Kid Griffin only shook his head obstinately and repeated his snuffling entreaty that Bob would release his wrist. It was evident that, for some reason—probably fear of somebody unknown—he did not want to tell who had the laces.

Just then a policeman could be made out in the distance, coming along from the Eighth Avenue end of the bridge, and Bob resolved to get to the taxicab that had brought Lucy, taking the reluctant Kid with them.

"We shall have to hold this fellow until we can get from him where the laces are and who has them," explained Bob. "He isn't the kind of traveling-companion I would choose for you, as I need not say. But I'll keep him on the other side of me in the cab."

"I don't mind, if we can recover the laces," was her quiet answer. "Will you take him to a police-station?"

"Probably—later," replied Bob grimly.

"He confesses that he's a thief," she went on. "Besides, we've found some of the property on him. Still, I think the most important thing is to find the remainder. Don't you?"

"S'help me—" began the Kid.

"Keep quiet!" ordered Bob, giving him an angry shake. Then, to Lucy: "I'm going to find the other laces, and I'll make this scoundrel help me. That or State prison for him."

"I'm sure up against it," moaned Kid Griffin.

Bob threw the wharf-rat into a corner of the cab, as far away from Lucy as possible. Then, as they rolled along on their way to the Hotel Supremacy, he cross-examined his prisoner with merciless perseverance. But it was no use. In vain he employed

both threats and promises in his endeavor to learn from the Kid the name of the man who had the remainder of the Trevelyan laces.

When, at the end of an exhausting twenty minutes, the taxi drew up at the hotel entrance without his having been able to get an answer, Bob Tower began to understand how it is that even the terrible "third degree" of the police often fails to extract important information from creatures of the Kid Griffin type.

While Lucy jumped from the cab and ran to Barry to show him how she had got possession of the Catherine de Medici collar, Bob made certain arrangements with one of the huskiest of the gigantic baggage-men about the hotel to take charge of the Kid.

"Keep him safe, Mikel" directed Bob. "Wait a moment! I'll go to the desk and make arrangements."

Five minutes later he handed a key to the giant porter, Mike, and the Kid was spirited away by a baggage elevator to one of the upper floors of the Supremacy, to remain there till he was wanted.

Bob looked wistfully across the wide lobby, where Lucy was excitedly talking to Barry.

For a moment Bob was tempted to join them. Then he remembered a slip of the tongue on the part of the Kid, which gave him a hopeful hint.

So he got into the taxi again and told the driver to take him to a certain street near the western water-front—a street on which one Donovan had a saloon, and which was on the regular beat of a big policeman named Kelly.

CHAPTER X.

SETTING THE SNARE.

CAPTAIN BOB TOWER had enjoyed a good night's sleep in the room that, for various reasons, he had taken at the Hotel Supremacy, and was driving away all morning drowsiness under the cold shower, when there came a knock at the door.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" muttered Bob. "This is a nice-time to disturb a man."

Then, raising his voice to a martial bellow, he told the person outside to "wait just a minute!"

With a bath-robe around him, he opened the door and found one of the hotel attendants with a message.

"What is it?" roared Bob angrily. "Why couldn't you telephone up, or put the blasted message on the ice until I had time to dress? What damned fool is it wants me at this ungodly hour—eight o'clock, when everybody knows I didn't come up to this room until past two? What kind of management is there in this hotel? Seems to me—"

"It's from Miss Oliver and Mr. Oliver, sir," interrupted the man, and he was wise enough to put the lady's name first. "They—"

"Thunder and Mars! Why didn't you say so before?" broke in Bob, with a violence worthy of Colonel Coleberry himself. "What is the message? Give it to me—quick!"

"They request the pleasure of your company at breakfast in their rooms at nine o'clock, sir," continued the man, who was an old hand and therefore unruffled by the before-breakfast asperity of a guest. "Shall I tell them—"

"Tell them I'll be there with very great pleasure, of course," thundered Bob. "Good God! What—" The man was turning away. "Here! Come back! What are you running away for? Wait till I get to my pocket!"

The attendant indulged in a respectful grin, which widened as he saw the size of the tip he had received, and Bob Tower banged the door shut, practically in his face.

Nine o'clock! And it was seven fifty at that moment! Bob would not have much more than time enough to dress.

As a soldier, he had no choice of raiment, for he would *have* to wear his army uniform. But he *could* take care that it was thoroughly brushed, and that all its buttons, *et cetera*, were shining and in perfect order.

Particular as Bob was that morning, however, he was ready at half past eight. So he had thirty minutes in which to think over the incidents of the night before, and

to speculate on their connection with the breakfast conference to which he had been invited.

He had visited Donovan's and made a number of inquiries there that might or might not bring results. Also he had seen Officer Kelly and arranged with him to be at a stated Fifth Avenue address in the afternoon—if Bob telephoned him.

As for Kid Griffin, that amphibious rodent was at that moment safely locked in a small bedroom on the twelfth floor of the Supremacy, where strong iron bars made escape by the window impossible—even if he could have climbed down—while the hall attendant on the floor had particular injunctions to see that he did not get out by the door.

"That reminds me," muttered Bob, as he took up the telephone and called the hotel office, to make sure his prisoner was secure, and to order a good, substantial breakfast for him.

These things done, he lighted a cigarette and gave himself up to day dreams—through which floated a fairylike figure, in a shimmering carnation-pink gown, and crowned with a tangle of red-gold, crinkled hair, which caressed the most captivating white neck he ever had beheld.

It was five minutes to nine when Bob was announced at the door of the Oliver suite. Barry and Lucy were waiting for him.

Was there something a trifle constrained in Lucy's manner as she gave him her firm little hand after Barry had shaken hands with him about as gently as if roping a steer? Did she seem to fear to meet his eye at first, and yet, directly afterward, look at him with her usual clear, straight gaze, as she wished him good morning? Did the dimples come and go a little quicker than usual when Bob bent low over her hand, and, unseen by Barry, brushed his lips across the slender fingers?

Bob could not have answered these questions. If he could, he would not have been tormenting himself about them all through breakfast, even though his chair was next to Lucy's, and they had many opportunities to exchange a whispered word while the big Arizona ranchman was absorbed in his meal.

Breakfast was served before anything was said about the missing laces and plans for their recovery. Then, as Barry despatched his first egg and attacked another, he opened the ball in his usual tempestuous manner.

"Bob, I believe we've got a mine under the damned horse-thief who stole those laces."

"Kid Griffin?" asked Bob.

"Naw!" drawled Barry, in disgust. "That poor, whimpering sneak! He doesn't amount to anything. Still, I'm glad you got the Medici collar out of him. That was a mighty good stroke."

"Of course it was, Barry!" put in Lucy, hastening to prevent any disparagement of what Bob had done in the matter. "And if it hadn't been for Mr. Tower, we shouldn't have the collar now."

Barry gave utterance to a volcanic guffaw.

"You two amuse me! You're as proud over catching that Kid What's-His-Name as a chicken over her first egg. Eh, Bob?"

He winked at Bob to make him understand it was all a joke, and that he appreciated the capture of the Kid. Then he went on:

"Yes, sir! We have a mine under him as sure as shooting, and we'll spring it this afternoon. Lucy knows."

Bob had looked inquiringly at Barry, but his gaze quickly wandered to the glowing face of the girl, as she nodded assent, and explained:

"Barry had a telephone from Mr. Samuel Lewis early this morning, saying that he had heard from his advertisement already."

"The yellow coyote could hardly wait to get in touch with Lewis," snorted Barry. "It was before seven when he called up, and he knew where Lewis lived, for he telephoned his home."

"He could find the residence in the telephone-book," quietly remarked Bob. "But his being in such a hurry indicates that he is afraid of some interference, and that he wants to get the laces off his hands as quickly as possible."

Barry brought his large hand down on the table with a bang that made the silver ring.

"By Jason!" he shouted. "You're right,

Bob! That's it! There's somebody after him, and I'll bet that scarecrow you have shut up on the twelfth floor could tell who it is."

"Most probably," was Bob's cool response. "I'm going up to see him after breakfast. What did Lewis tell you?"

"That the man who telephoned him will be at Lewis's place on Fifth Avenue at two o'clock, prepared to talk business."

"Didn't say he'd bring the laces?" asked Bob thoughtfully.

"No. But if he comes himself, it won't be hard to get them, I guess."

Bob said nothing for a few moments. At last, drawing a long breath: "No, I don't think it will be hard. Is that all Lewis told you?"

"That was all. Then I sent word to you to come to breakfast. I didn't want to say even that much over the phone."

"Have you any plans?"

Bob said this while looking at Lucy. With the long, dark lashes falling over her eyes; as she went on with her breakfast, and a stray lock of the red-gold hair dancing on her forehead, he reminded her of a wood nymph as he had seen them in pictures, and he almost marveled that she needed such prosaic food as eggs and rolls and coffee.

Not that she was too ethereal to enjoy her breakfast. Lucy Oliver was a Western girl, used to riding hard and to outdoor exercise of all kinds, and her appetite was healthy, especially in the morning.

So, when she suddenly looked up, just as she reached for another roll, she broke into a laugh in which all the dimples joined, and Bob was glad she was a real girl, and not a dryad.

Barry had not noticed any of this by-play. He was considering Bob's last question, while he kept on with his breakfast.

He had not made any definite plans, except to get the laces from the thief when he should offer them for sale to Samuel Lewis.

Now that he was asked pointblank what he meant to do, however, he came to a quick decision.

"I'm going to be in Samuel Lewis's place when that fellow comes," he announced

loudly, "and he'll be lucky if I don't ride him down as soon as I get hold of my property. I want you to go with me, Bob."

"Can I go?" asked Lucy, hesitatingly.

"Why?" bellowed her brother. "What do you want to go for? You have your Catherine de Medici collar, and the rest of the laces are nothing to you."

Then, as he saw the hurt expression in her eyes, while her breath came quick and short, he added hastily: "No, I didn't mean that, of course, sis. But there may be a row, and I didn't want you to be in it. Eh, Bob?"

"Mr. Tower won't object, I'm sure," she declared before Bob could speak. "He knows I can take care of myself with thieves."

"You gave good proof of that last night," answered Bob.

"Very well, then," agreed Barry, good naturedly. "Let her come. I wonder who the thief is? Some professional crook, I should say, from his ways. By the way, have you heard anything of Jones?"

"No. Haven't *you*?" asked Bob.

"He hasn't been around," replied Barry, frowning. "Rather queer, isn't it? If we could get hold of him, it might be well to take him with us. Well, it is quite possible he will be there, anyhow. If he knows who the thief is, he ought to be able to trail him up to Lewis's. That seems a perfectly natural thing."

Bob nodded assentingly. It *did* seem natural.

"He may be working up this whole case by letting the thief know in some way that Lewis would buy the laces," went on Barry, shrewdly. "That prisoner of yours could help us to find out, I believe, if you could make him talk. He's an obstinate devil. But there ought to be some way of making him loosen up."

"He's scared of somebody," said Bob, seriously. "He knows what his kind do to what they call 'squealers,' Barry."

"H-m! I haven't much use for men who'd go back on their pards myself," admitted Barry. "Even a horse-thief—if there is any white blood in him—won't double-cross his pals. I've seen 'em with the rope around their necks refuse to save themselves

by giving away the rest of the gang. Still, that doesn't help us about the laces. Going up to see this Kid Griffin, Bob?"

"Yes. After a night's sleep, he may be more tractable and answer some questions," remarked Bob. "I'll go up there now."

"Keep him hungry," suggested Barry. "There's nothing like a little starving to bring 'em to time."

Bob did not confess that he'd had a breakfast sent to Kid Griffin. He did not agree with Barry Oliver in everything. So he went up and remained more than an hour with the now much cowed wharf-rat. Whether he got anything out of him he did not tell anybody. He only shook his head non-committally when Barry asked him in the hotel lobby afterward.

But Kid Griffin went in the taxicab with Barry, Lucy, and Bob Tower to the high building in which, on the eighth floor, Samuel Lewis had his business establishment.

The cab stopped a block away, and Bob told Barry that they were going in by the back entrance on the side street, where goods were delivered and received.

"We're two hours ahead of time," remarked Bob. "But this fellow with the laces is quite likely to be on the watch to see whether anybody goes up to Lewis's place with the intention of trapping him. We may beat him by taking the freight elevator in the rear."

"Can you do that? Will the men at the elevator let us go up that way?" objected Barry.

"My uniform as an officer will carry us through," smiled Bob, confidently. "They'll suppose it is government service. Nobody questions army officers these days, no matter what they do."

"Smart boy!" commended Barry, grinning. "Come on! Look out for that prisoner of yours."

"I have him," was Bob Tower's quiet reply, as he kept his strong fingers twisted into Kid Griffin's sleeve.

Suddenly Lucy whispered, as she gazed earnestly down the street at the main entrance of the sky-scraper, where dozens of persons were going in and out of the revolving doors:

"Look! Isn't that Mr. Jones? That

tail, thin man, with his soft hat pulled down over his forehead? *See!* By the door!"

"Where?" blurted out Barry. "Did you see Jones? Where is he?"

But Barry was too late. The tall man had disappeared into the doorway.

CHAPTER XI.

KID GRIFFIN TALKS.

SAMUEL LEWIS had several rooms on the eight floor of the great building, and in all of them were displayed examples of the fine arts that made the place an Elysium to the collector.

Rare porcelains, old silver cunningly fashioned by men of age-old fame, splendid fabrics of all kinds, including ivory laces, some of which were as priceless as those in the Trevelyan collection, jades, onyxes, cameos, mosaics, and precious stones whose names the ordinary observer could not tell, jewels from India, strange utensils from Pompeii and Herculaneum, ivories from China, pictures from everywhere—all these and more were disposed along the walls and in glass cases in the center of the spacious lofty rooms.

Samuel Lewis could tell the history of every piece and its present value without referring to a catalogue. He was an art expert in the fullest sense of the term.

"The man telephoned he would be here at two," he remarked calmly, when Barry blustered into Lewis's reception room, where the proprietor himself bowed a welcome to Lucy, his square face and turned-down mouth showing no evidence of anxiety.

"But I'm glad you came ahead of time," he said. "If you'll sit down in my private room, you can hear and see everything through these slats in the partition, without being observed by any one outside."

He indicated a series of slits ingeniously devised to give Mr. Lewis himself a perspective of his whole domain when he happened to be shut in—a rather necessary arrangement considering that it was not at all an uncommon thing for strangers to browse at will among his show-cases, often without making purchases. The Lewis collection was famous among lovers of curios.

"You haven't found out who the man is, I suppose?" asked Bob, as they strolled through the rooms, with Lucy Oliver going into ecstasies at every step as she discovered some new wonder, and Barry regarding the display with the restrained admiration of an expert. "Did he write you at any stage of your dealings with him?"

"No," replied Lewis, promptly. "I've heard his voice over the phone, that's all, and it tells me nothing, for he spoke in a low, but distinct tone. I should say, however, that he is a young man."

"Well, we shall know when he comes," returned Bob. "He will come into this reception room from the hall, of course?"

"Yes. This is the main entrance. There are no center show-cases here, as you see. They would be rather in the way. Well, when you have looked around a bit, you can come into my room. I would advise you to come soon, because we don't know when our man will arrive."

This was a good suggestion from Samuel Lewis, for the party had not more than become comfortably settled, a little after one, in the inner office, with the door shut, when a tall, slim man, carrying a traveling-bag—not a yellow suit-case—walked slowly into the reception room and looked about him.

The man was clad in an ordinary business suit, with a soft hat, and there was nothing peculiar about him—except that he wore a small black mask which concealed his nose and mouth, but allowed his keen eyes freedom between the top of the mask and the brim of his drawn-down hat.

He seemed to have just put on the mask, for he was still adjusting it as he stepped into the reception room.

Samuel Lewis was there alone, and he expressed no surprise, either in word or manner, at the apparition of a masked stranger in his establishment. He looked at him as coolly as if it were an every-day experience in Fifth Avenue places of business for burglarious-looking persons, with covered faces, to come in about two o'clock in the afternoon and stand in silence, looking at the proprietor.

"Trevelyan?" said Samuel Lewis, in quiet interrogation, when the man did not speak.

"Yes," was the reply. "Are you ready to talk business?"

It was obvious that the man was endeavoring to disguise his natural tones, for he spoke in a high, wheezing voice which broke in the middle, as if it were a strain.

"Let me see the laces," was Lewis's response. "There is a table over by the wall."

The man did not move except to turn his head in the direction of the door in the partition behind which Bob Tower, Barry and Lucy Oliver were looking and listening at the slats, with Kid Griffin trembling behind them.

"Who's in that room?" he demanded brusquely, and Samuel Lewis noted that his mysterious visitor forgot to disguise his voice, and spoke in deep, half-angry, half-frightened tones. "Anybody there?"

Samuel Lewis shrugged and smiled easily.

"It's my private office. Let's go in there."

He walked over and placed a hand on the knob, as if to open the door. But the man stopped him with a hasty gesture, and strode to the table near the wall.

"Never mind," he grunted. "I reckon you wouldn't want anybody around to see you make this deal. You know the price?"

"Fifty thousand?" replied Lewis calmly.

"That's right. And it's dirt cheap. You'll get more than a hundred thousand." The high, wheezing voice was in use again. "I want this in bills of a hundred each. I told you that."

"Yes," assented Lewis, without emotion. "Hundred-dollar bills. You told me that. Ten packages of five thousand dollars each."

"That's what. I don't want any bigger money than that. You might have the numbers of the notes, and if they were a thousand apiece, I might have trouble. Centuries are common. I don't care if you have the numbers of those. Only banks would get on to them, and I don't deal with banks much. Where is the money?"

"Let me see the laces," was Lewis's rejoinder. "I can get the money out of my safe easily enough when I know you have the goods."

"All right. Here they are!"

5 ARGOSY

It was evident to Bob and Barry that the man, whoever he was—and Bob thought he recognized the voice, in spite of the wheeze, to say nothing of his having heard it when undisguised for a fleeting period—did not fear Lewis, and they had no doubt that he would not hesitate even at murder if it became necessary for his safety.

In another moment the traveling-bag was open, and the Trevelyan laces, in a disordered heap, were on the long polished table. It made Barry shiver as he saw the precious collection thrown out as if it were a bundle of old rags.

But Samuel Lewis made no sign. He went through the pieces one by one, as if to assure himself they were all there. Then suddenly he looked up sharply into the masked visage at his side.

"Where is the Catherine de Medici piece—the collar?" he demanded sternly.

"I don't know anything about it," snarled the man. "I've brought all the laces that came to me."

"But the Catherine de Medici is the most valuable of them all. It is worth ten thousand in itself. If you haven't got that, you can't expect me to pay you the full amount. I bargained for *all* the Trevelyan laces."

Kid Griffin heard this, and in his excitement was going to pull open the door and rush out. But Bob seized him by the collar and, as he dragged him back, gave him in silence a menacing look that cowed him, and he sank back into a chair with a low whine of terror.

The man gathered the laces up and was putting them in the bag, as if the deal were off, when Lewis stopped him by placing a hand on his arm, as he said evenly:

"Don't be hasty. We can arrange this matter. Come into the private room, where my safe is."

It had been agreed that this was to be done, and of course Bob and Barry were both ready to leap on the thief as he entered.

Samuel Lewis replaced the laces in the bag and carried it himself, the stranger watching him jealously over the rim of his black mask.

They had just reached the door, and

Samuel Lewis's fingers were on the handle; when a howl of rage sounded behind them, and a tall, slim man bounded forward from the outer entrance, and tearing off the thief's mask with one hand, sent a bony fist into his cheek-bone that staggered him.

"You double-dealing, cheap crook!" screeched the newcomer. "I knew I'd land you! Take this!"

It was William Jones who had come rushing into the room, and the man who had worn the mask was a stranger to Bob Tower and every one else in the room, except Jones, who evidently knew him well.

For a moment the man who had tried to sell the laces wavered, in his surprise. But now, before Jones could land on him again, he had recovered, and, parrying the blow aimed at his jaw, shot one against Jones's eye that knocked him backward.

Then the two men—and Barry noted that Jones was much stronger than he looked—went in for such a fight as was never seen in that building before, and not often anywhere else.

They exchanged several sledge-hammer blows, and then stood off for an instant, eying each other, looking for an opening.

It was William Jones who took up the offensive again. He tried a right swing, missed, and, as the other uppercut him savagely, grappled, and the two went to the floor.

They punched, gouged, bit, tore like wild stallions as much as anything—and for ten minutes it was impossible for anybody to interfere.

Samuel Lewis, cool as ever, but keeping an eye on the fighters to make sure they did not carry the battle into the next room, where the show-cases were, walked to the outer door and closed it. The building had sound-proof walls and floors, and he was not afraid of any one outside hearing the noise of the fray when the door was closed. He occupied the whole of the eighth floor.

Suddenly, a gurgling groan told that the man of the mask was in dire straits, and Bob seized William Jones's arms to pull him off.

Jones had his long fingers in the throat of his adversary. When at last he let go and arose to his feet, the man on the floor

was quiet, with eyes half-closed, while his purple face was that of one who had been strangled.

"Who is that?" asked Bob Tower, pointing to the unconscious man.

"His name is Macey Gibbons," replied Jones, gasping for breath, for he had had a hard time to subdue his foe. "He's a thief!" he added, scornfully.

Then came a surprise for Jones, as well as Bob and Barry, when Kid Griffin, rushing out of the private office, where he had remained during the fight, peeping at it through the slats in the partition, screamed wildly:

"Don't mind what that guy says, captain—that Jones. He's the crook what stole the laces in the first place. Macey on'y got 'em afterward. This here Jones—his real name's Beau Landon—was tryin' to beat Macey out o' his bit—'cause Macey fust got on to these here laces comin' to New York—an' Macey pinched the goods from Jones an' come here to make a sale of 'em."

"You're not going to take any notice of what this pickpocket says, of course, Captain Tower?" said Jones, with a feeble laugh. "It's queer what fellows of this sort will say when they are in trouble. He's associated with Macey Gibbons, and I guess we'd better arrest them both."

Jones had been edging his way along the partition, with an evil eye on Kid Griffin. But Bob got in his way, unostentatiously, but effectively.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Jones!" he interrupted. "We may as well hear what more Griffin has to say. Go on, Kid," he continued. "What proof is there that Mr. Jones had anything to do with stealing the laces? Be careful now! Don't lie! This is a serious matter."

"You bet it's serious—for *him*!" shouted Kid Griffin desperately. "I'm goin' to tell the trut' now. I'd ha' done it before on'y he'd ha' killed me if he'd knowed I told on him. Maybe he'll do it anyhow, but—"

"No, he won't!" interposed Bob. "I'll promise he won't hurt you."

William Jones's big nose dilated dangerously, and his yellow eyes shot gleams of

deadly hate at both Kid Griffin and Bob Tower, as the wharf rat went on:

"He made me pinch the suit-case from the taxi. He put up the job, an' it was all a stall him puttendin' to try an' ketch me when I beat it after swingin' the sandbag on Mr. Oliver there. Then, when you come to the room at Donovan's, he was takin' prints of the laces. You seen the stove an' the hot irons, didn't yer? An' what's more, I got some of the prints right here, to prove it. You know I wouldn't know how to do it even if I wanted ter. But Jones—Beau Landon—is a smart crook, an' he can do t'ings like that. Here's them prints!"

He tore from inside his shirt several impressions that Barry Oliver and Samuel Lewis at once recognized as part of the Trevelyan laces. He gave them to Bob, who quietly passed them to Barry.

"I guess I'd better go if you are going to pay any serious attention to this maniacal talk," said Jones, with an ugly grin, as he made a sudden move toward the outer entrance.

"Wait!" thundered Bob, with a hand on his arm. "You can afford to listen to it—if you're innocent."

"Innocent?" sneered Jones. But he stayed.

"Feel in his inside pocket!" screamed Kid Griffin. "Quick! Here!"

Kid Griffin had a reputation among his associates of being one of the slickest pick-pockets in New York, and how he got a flat package from Jones's inside pocket without seeming to touch him must be ascribed to his magnificent technique.

"Look!" he cried, as he tore the package open. "There they are! Look at 'em!"

"Trevelyan laces—more of 'em, by the eternal!" roared Barry Oliver.

"Yes, an' they's more proofs!" continued Kid, heedless of everything but denouncing the now discomfited, mouthing Jones. "Take him to headquarters an' let 'em look up his record. That's all you have ter do! An' I don't care if I get a ten-year stretch up the river! I've told the trut', anyhow!"

At that moment, William Jones shot out one of his feet and tried to trip Bob Tower. The attempt was unsuccessful, and the next

instant Bob sent him reeling backward with a jab to the jaw that had behind it the steam of an athlete in good training.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RULING PASSION.

WILLIAM JONES did not attempt to return the blow at first. His main idea seemed to be to get out of the place. He darted to the outer door, swung it open, and would have made a bolt for the stairs, without waiting for the elevator. But luck was against him. Right in the doorway he came into collision with an elderly man who swore lustily and butted him back to the middle of the room.

The swearing gentleman was the redoubtable Colonel Coleberry, and mustache, imperial, and pompadoured hair all bristled with indignation.

"Hell and blazes!" he roared. "What the devil does this mean, Lewis? Can't a gentleman come to look over your collection without being knocked down in the doorway. Who is this person?" he demanded, glowering at Jones.

"Get out of my way, you old ass!" snarled Jones, making for the door.

"Wow! Gr-r-r-r!" roared the colonel.

Colonel Coleberry was seventy-seven years of age, but the vicious blow he aimed at Jones's chin would have done execution had it landed.

But Jones blocked it with his elbow, and, heedless of the white hair of his assailant, would have knocked him down with a savage counter-attack.

Before he could send his blow home, however, Bob Tower caught him by the shoulder, twisted him around and sent in another sledge-hammer blow to the chin in about the same place that he had landed before.

Jones backed away, staggering, while the colonel bobbed about him, whirling arms, like a pugnacious jumping-jack.

"Come away from him, Captain Tower!" shouted the old gentleman. "This fellow is mine, I tell you! I can lick five such damned scoundrels before breakfast any morning. He called me an old—"

Colonel Coleberry choked on the scandalous epithet. He simply could *not* bring himself to say it as applied to himself. Instead, he rushed at his enemy headlong.

Unfortunately, Bob attacked Jones at the same instant, and in the mix-up the colonel was sent spinning across the room, dazed and temporarily helpless, but as full of fight as ever.

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!" he bellowed. "Where is that scalawag? Let me get into this scrap!"

But he couldn't, valiantly as he tried, with arms, legs, voice and all in full action. Jones was fighting in desperation—for he knew it meant a prison cell if he were captured—and Bob Tower was determined he should not get away. So the battle surged all over the reception room, with the colonel always in the way.

It was a hard time for the old Civil War hero. Somehow, he was always getting assaulted, with no chance for reprisal. He was hustled, jounced, shoved, kicked, punched, elbowed, and bumped, over and over again. And with it all he had not been able to land one punch on his own account. It was heart-breaking!

"Here, you selfish devil!" he bawled at Bob. "Captain Tower! Stand back a minute, and let me get in! You're not a gentleman, sir, to interfere in another gentleman's quarrel. I tell you, sir—"

Just then the two combatants fell into a clinch, and the colonel was bunted backward until he found himself jammed against the wall, with Jones's shoulders against his face.

"Get away, sir!" screamed the colonel. "Take your cursed unpleasant, bad-smelling carcass off my nose, sir! I'll break you in two, sir, when I get my hands on you! What the devil do you mean, sir?"

But the fight went on, regardless of Colonel Coleberry or anybody else in the room. Jones fought because he had to, if he hoped to save himself from the police, and Bob Tower was avenging himself for all the trouble this sly, impudent thief had cost him in the past forty-eight hours, and particularly for certain leers he had seen Jones cast at Lucy Oliver when lounging about the Supremacy.

Bob had not said anything about the obvious attempts of this tall, big-nosed cad to attract Lucy's attention with his clumsy gallantries, but he had promised himself the pleasure of giving him a lesson in decent behavior at the first convenient opportunity. Now that chance had brought it to him sooner than he had anticipated, he rejoiced and made the most of it.

It was not a very long fight, after all.

While the colonel continued to dodge in and out, getting an occasional random kick and cuff, and blowing off profane steam at the top of his voice, Bob wore down his foe, and at last, steadying him with a light tap on the chest with his right, sent in his left fist for what is called, in professional fight circles, the "sleep punch" on the point of the jaw.

William Jones lay stretched out by the side of the slowly recovering Macey Gibbons, and Lucy was solicitously examining a cut knuckle on Bob's left hand, and begging him to let her bathe it in cold water under the tap of the ice-water tank, when a shout from Barry in the private room suggested more trouble.

"Lewis! Lewis! Come here!"

"What's the matter, Oliver?" asked Samuel Lewis, startled a little out of his usual calm by Barry's vehemence. "What do you want?"

"The laces!" cried Barry. "Where are they?"

"On my table in there, aren't they?"

Samuel Lewis rushed into his private office, and Lucy and Bob followed. Barry was wildly tearing about the room, searching under chairs and tables, and at intervals calling to Lewis.

"They were in the bag, on that desk," were Lewis's first words, as he looked around. "Don't you see the bag, Oliver?"

"It was here before that Jones came in," replied Barry. "I saw it on the desk myself."

"Where's the Kid?" asked Bob suddenly.

"That's the solution, of course," he went on. "The Kid's gone—and the laces with him. A thief is a thief, and he'll steal even when he could make more by being honest, as in this case. You can't beat the ruling passion. Wait a moment!"

He dashed out of the private room, ran through the chain of show-rooms, assured himself that Kid Griffin was not in any of them, and then swung the outer door of the reception room wide open.

"Hello, Kelly! Did you get him?" asked Bob, of somebody outside.

"Yes, sir," boomed a deep voice. "Here's the bird!"

Kelly, in full uniform, appeared in the doorway, holding by the neck in one hand the cringing Kid Griffin, and in the other the bag of Trevelyan laces.

"Well, I'm glad we've got them back," remarked Samuel Lewis. "Barry Oliver has had trouble enough about them. But how came this officer to be on hand right in the building?" he added, evidently puzzled.

"I arranged with Kelly to be here," said Bob quietly. "He knows this Kid Griffin—and Jones, too, I find. So I told him to be on the lookout, and when he saw the laces—or the bag—to grab them, as well as the person who happened to have them, and bring them to me. I was not sure that there would be anything for him to do, but I was determined not to lose anything for lack of caution!"

Just then Bob happened to catch Lucy's eye, and as he saw the pink mounting in her soft cheek, and noted how the dimples came and went, as they always did when she was pleased, he could almost have forgiven the Kid for stealing the laces since it had given him—Bob—a chance to recover them and win that look from her.

"Where was he, Kelly?" he asked, turning to the policeman. "Where did you get him?"

"Just going to sneak down the stairway. If he'd slipped into the elevator, he'd have had a better chance—although of course I'd have nabbed him, anyhow," continued Kelly, unwilling to admit that his captive ever had one chance in a million of eluding his vigilance.

"Well, as soon as I saw who it was, and that he had a bag, I made the pinch before he could put up the beginning of a spiel. He had one ready when I had him, about how he was taking the bag to the next floor for somebody, and all that kind of bunk.

We are used to hearing stuff of that kind, and it only makes us laugh."

"What's up?" called out Barry, as he caught sight of the policeman. "Found out anything?"

"It's the laces, Barry!" called out Bob, as Barry came rushing over to him. "This fellow had them. Kid Griffin! He'd been telling me in that room at the Hotel Supremacy that he meant to go straight from now on—across his heart, and so forth. But—once a thief always a thief—in most cases. I'm afraid the Kid is hopeless."

"Sure he is," put in Kelly positively. "I know his gang. Hang around Donovan's most of the time. There's only one cure for them, and that's a trip up the river. What'll I do with him, sir? Take him to the station?"

"I suppose so," answered Bob. "What do you say, Barry?"

Barry was carefully going over the laces that came from the bag, and checking them off, with those they had taken from Jones. He had just satisfied himself that he had the whole collection now, with the exception of the Mediocr collar, and he heaved a great sigh of relief.

"What did you say, Bob?" he asked, absently, his eyes still on the laces.

"I was asking what we should do with Kid Griffin," replied Bob, smiling at Barry's preoccupation. "I was thinking of sending him to the police-station—at least, for the present."

"I'd be willing to see him hanged," declared Barry, shortly. "But I suppose jail is the only thing we can do with him."

"All right, Kelly," said Bob. "Then suppose you take him. And while you're about it, get some help and take those two fellows on the floor. You may need a wagon. But get them out of here."

"Yes," broke in Lewis. "I wish you would. I've never had such a performance as this in my place since it was opened. It looks more like a barroom after a scrap than an art importer's show-rooms."

Sam Lewis was noted for his imperturbability, but he certainly showed some irritation now. It must be admitted that he had considerable provocation, for not only had there been a disturbance in his

establishment which was very obnoxious to a man of his quiet habits, but he knew certainly now that the Trevelyan laces could never be sold to his customers—unless at some time he might be able to purchase them of Colonel Coleberry. That, however, he knew was practically hopeless—so long as the colonel lived, at all events.

"I suppose you can attend to these arrests, Kelly?" asked Bob, as a sudden doubt seized him. "This isn't your precinct, is it?"

"A New York policeman's on duty wherever he happens to be, sir," was Kelly's virtuous reply. "I'm glad you got the laces, sir. That big chump, Macey Gibbons, is a pretty slick crook. But he isn't in it with Beau Landon—who calls himself William Jones. No, sir, Jones is about the smoothest I know. If you're going to push him through you'll have to look out for him. He'll get a good lawyer and slip away yet unless you clamp him down."

"I'll clamp him," promised Barry grimly. "Hey, colonel! Here!"

Colonel Coleberry had not heard anything about the laces being stolen, it must be remembered, and it only now began to dawn on him that he might be personally interested.

"What do you want, Barry?" he responded. "Wait a moment, will you?" He was gazing down at the feebly squirming and only half-conscious Jones. "I'd like to give this pesky coyote the thrashing he deserves," he mused. "But I don't see how I can till he gets over this. Just my luck! All right, Barry! I'm coming. What are these laces you are making such a fuss about?"

His eye fell on the neatly-folded laces on the table, where Barry was still arranging them, and he howled with excitement. "Great jumping Jupiter! Do you mean to say they are—"

"Yes, colonel," replied Barry, with a more cheerful smile than he had worn since he knew the laces were stolen. "These are the Trevelyan laces."

"They are? And they've been *stolen*?" shrieked Colonel Coleberry, turning to glower at Jones and Macey Gibbons.

"Good God! Why—er—it seems impossible! *Stolen*! The Trevelyan collection! Here! Give them to me! By the Lord, they don't go out of my hands again!"

He gathered up the whole bundle, stuffed it into the bag, and wrapped his arms around it with a defiant frown.

"Now, get a taxi and let's hurry back to the hotel. I want to show them to Mrs. Coleberry. Lucy, my dear, are you coming with me?"

"I've telephoned for two taxicabs," announced Lewis, in his quiet way. "You'll need two for all your party." Then, turning to Kelly: "How are you going to get your prisoners to the station? Taxicab?"

"No, sir. It's a wagon for ours," replied Kelly. "I'll have one here in ten minutes, with some more officers. I took the liberty of telephoning the station from your office while you were looking at the laces."

The wagon with the three handcuffed prisoners, guarded by three policemen besides Kelly, moved away from the rear of the big building just as two taxicabs left the front entrance. In one of the taxis was Colonel Coleberry, the laces, and Barry. Lucy and Bob Tower were in the other. Is it necessary to say that Bob made this arrangement?

"How lucky that you found the laces, isn't it?" were Lucy's first words as the cab started. She had not seemed to notice that Bob's hand had stolen over to hers in the gloom. "You suspected Jones always, didn't you?"

"Confound Jones!" was Bob's inward remark. Then aloud, in offhand tones: "Yes, it was easy to see through him. I knew there was another man, too, though I couldn't get his name out of Griffin. That was Macey Gibbons. It seems Jones was trying to cheat the Kid and Gibbons out of their share of the plunder. That's what caused Jones's downfall. You know the axiom: 'When thieves fall out,' " he laughed.

"Yes. But how splendidly you worked it all out. I suppose that's what military men call 'strategy,'" she said thoughtfully.

He did not answer for a moment. Then, all the offhandedness gone from his low, vibrating voice, as unconsciously he tight-

ened his grasp on her fingers. "I wish I were strategist enough to induce you to let me tell something that was on my lips last night when you stopped me."

"I—I don't understand," she faltered.

But she fibbed—fibbed like a—well, like a girl whose beating heart chokes back the truth just because she is a girl.

Bob Tower's lips were so dry that he had to pass his tongue over them feverishly. At last he blurted out:

"I used to call you my sweetheart when you were a little girl. May I call you that now?" He had bent so that he could look directly into her starry eyes as they were lighted up momentarily by occasional street lamps. "May I?"

She was so long before she spoke that he was afraid he had offended her. But at last came a murmur: "How can I help what you call me?"

Well, of course she *could* have helped it, and Bob knew it.

"Then you will give me the right?" he whispered.

"I can't give what you've already taken," she fenced.

"And you really mean that, with all it implies?" God, how his heart thumped!

"Hotel Supremacy?" suddenly barked the driver through the front window.

"Yes," thundered Bob. "That's what I told you."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Lucy, and Bob warmed within as he saw she was genuinely annoyed. "I didn't think we were anywhere near the hotel as yet."

She looked up shyly at him in the semi-darkness—for they were at the back of

three other cabs drawing up to the entrance. The dimples danced in her cheek and about her delicately-curved, rich, red lips, as she breathed, her voice as low as a summer night breeze in a rose garden:

"What was it you asked me?"

Bob may have said something, but it was so ejaculatory as to be incoherent. Anyhow, he took her in his arms—dimples, starry eyes, lips, ruddy-gold hair, and all—and held her there!

She ran to the elevator, flushed and slightly disheveled, as soon as she could, and Bob did not see her for an hour. When she reappeared her hair was in order, and every item of her costume as neat as usual.

"I've told Barry!" she whispered to Bob, as they sat together for a few moments in that magnificent reception room where the decorative desks were, waiting for Barry. "He is *glad*." She paused, and Bob thought her blush was heavenly. Then she added, with outrageous candor, but not looking into his face: "I *knew* he would be."

Colonel Coleberry insisted on their all dining with him, ostensibly to "celebrate the recovery of the Trevelyan laces," as he put it.

Barry Oliver never could keep anything to himself—at least, Lucy said so—so after dinner, when Colonel Coleberry had his cigar going to his satisfaction, he slapped Bob Tower violently on the back, and whispered huskily:

"You're a confounded lucky young cuss, Tower. But, by gad, sir, I believe you deserve your luck!"

(The End.)